FourFourTwo

HAVE YOUR SAY #FFTPREVIEW

SEASON PREVIEW 2023-24







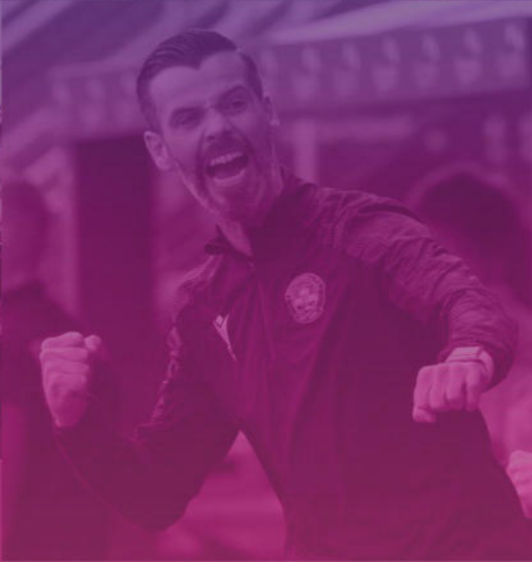

» 140 TEAMS RATED «

PREMIER LEAGUE › CHAMPIONSHIP › LEAGUE 1 › LEAGUE 2 › NON-LEAGUE › WSL › SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP



BOREHAM WOOD
BWFC



CHAMPION
sky bet
LEAGUE ONE
EFL


32Red

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR FOOTBA
AIA
getir
cinch





WELCOME

Are you ready? After a marathon season in 2022-23, we're back to do it all over again. The great thing about this time of the year is the fact that every club begins with hopes and aspirations. Over the next few months, each team will find their place, but now's the time for every fan to dream about a happy ending in April or May – at this stage, the sky really is the limit. In these pages, we assess no fewer than 140 teams as they set out for the 2023-24 campaign. Whoever you support, enjoy the season.

James Andrew
@JamesAndrew_ @FourFourTwo



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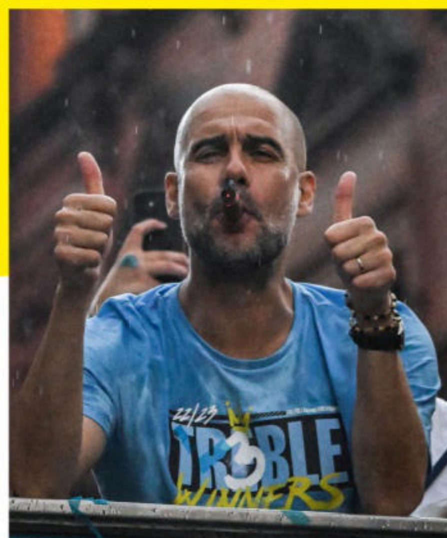


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PREMIER LEAGUE / 2023-24



Manchester City are the odds-on favourites to secure a historic fourth consecutive English league title, but it's anyone's game after that. Strap in – the next 12 months could veer in one of many different directions



Last season brought a smashing of the Big Six, with the status quo scattered up and down the table as the unusual suspects put a stake in the ground. Will the Premier League revert back to type, with the heavyweights all rising to the top this season? Or is this the start of something new, with smaller sides continuing to compete?

While several of their rivals floundered, however, Manchester City were reliably extraordinary. It's time to do it all again: Erling Haaland is waking up from hibernation, Jack Grealish has just about caught up on his sleep and Pep Guardiola is about to emerge from his tactical bunker once more, armed with another masterplan. Following their Treble triumph, City are chasing more history: in 130 years, not even your great-grandad has seen a team storm to four English top-flight titles on the trot. Who's ready to stop this super side from being the first?



Rarely before have so many had the nerve. Mikel Arteta's Arsenal came the closest last time around, his young guns firing as apprentice almost unseated mentor in the dugout. Dropping £170m on Declan Rice and Kai Havertz shows an ambition to go again.

The other goliaths are bouncing back. Jurgen Klopp has reshaped Liverpool. Erik ten Hag has Manchester United's squad all pulling in the same direction. And Chelsea and Tottenham each have new managers, and new playing styles, as they seek to reverse their negative momentum. In 14 full campaigns of the so-called Big Six, created by the Abu Dhabi Group's takeover of Manchester City, the 2022-23 season was only the second time that two of those half-dozen teams have failed to qualify for Europe.

Newcastle, meanwhile, had no flux to speak of. The moneyed Magpies were relentless and riveting in equal part, and represent the best of the outsiders who have rattled the establishment. Brighton and Aston Villa, too, were shrewd and smart, ultimately qualifying for Europe with phenomenal campaigns. They'll each believe they can push even further now.

London clubs are also resurgent, and not just the Europa Conference League-winning West Ham. Crystal Palace finished their campaign with a flourish under Roy Hodgson, while Fulham and Brentford had stellar seasons featuring pace, power and prolific forwards who fired their sides into the top half. Could more European football be heading to the capital?

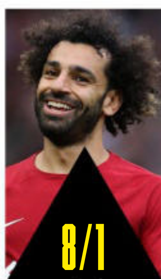
WHO WILL FINISH AS TOP SCORER?



ERLING HAALAND



HARRY KANE



MOHAMED SALAH



MARCUS RASHFORD



GABRIEL JESUS



CALLUM WILSON

FourFourTwo PREDICTION

1 Man City
2 Man United
3 Arsenal
4 Liverpool
5 Chelsea
6 Newcastle
7 Tottenham
8 Aston Villa
9 Brighton
10 West Ham
11 Crystal Palace
12 Fulham
13 Burnley
14 Brentford
15 Wolves
16 Bournemouth
17 Nott'm Forest
18 Everton
19 Sheffield Utd
20 Luton



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Then there are those hoping to pack a heftier punch in 2023-24. Wolves and Bournemouth both have high-intensity coaches from the Basque Country who will have full pre-seasons and surprises in store for the big boys, while Nottingham Forest have certainly shown the financial ambition to establish themselves as a mainstay at this level. Let's not forget Everton, either, who could be a wholly different prospect after a transfer window with Sean Dyche at the helm.

Things are about as competitive as they ever have been. Each of the three promoted teams are battling and brilliant in their own ways, too. Burnley waltzed to the title playing beautiful football and could shock many, while Sheffield United must find a way to take their no-frills consistency up a level. Luton Town, meanwhile, become the 51st team to play in the Premier League – and will host home games at the division's smallest ever stadium, the 10,300-capacity Kenilworth Road. Can they make it a cauldron, as they did in the play-off semi-final second leg?

Luton will take comfort from this being a league in which anyone can beat anyone else. Brentford did the double over Treble-winning City last term, West Ham finished the lowest of all seven London clubs yet won a trophy, and Chelsea spent £600m to barely scrape together 40 points. Who knows where we'll be in another year's time? The future is unwritten – and it has never been quite so unpredictable.

Mark White

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

01 Manchester City are looking for a 10th English title – which three teams have won more?

02 Luton's Kenilworth Road will become the smallest-ever Premier League stadium this season, taking the record from which club?

03 Ange Postecoglou is the Premier League's first Australian manager – but which Aussie is the only non-Brit to have racked up 500 appearances in the league?

04 Who is the only Arsenal player to have appeared in all 38 of their league matches in each of the last two campaigns?

05 How many league goals did Chelsea score in the whole of last season: 38, 40 or 42?

06 Who was Newcastle United's last manager in a Champions League match?

07 Sheffield United are back in the big time now; which World Cup-winning icon did they come close to signing in the 1970s?

08 In which year did Everton last win the Charity/Community Shield?

09 Which player scored a league-high seven penalties in the top flight last season?

10 Aston Villa finished 7th and qualified for the Europa Conference League after Unai Emery [below] joined the club – but where were they in the table when he arrived in October?



1. Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal **2.** Bournemouth **3.** Mark Schwarzer **4.** Bukayo Saka **5.** 38 **6.** Sir Bobby Robson **7.** Diego Maradona **8.** 1996 **9.** Erling Haaland **10.** 15th



NO LOSER Netting against Chelsea in May gave Gabriel Jesus a new Premier League record for most games scored in without ending on the losing side (55)



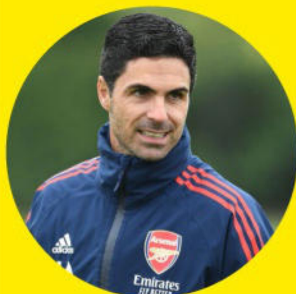
ARSENAL

MARK WHITE @markwhlte

TEAMS WORKED OUT HOW TO BLUNT THEM IN THE RUN-IN. THEY NEED ALTERNATIVES

THE PLAN

Gold Premier League trophy still (just about) gleaming, it's now 20 years of hurt for Arsenal. Yet seldom in two post-Invincible decades have the Gunners rekindled that va-va-voom... until now. Mikel Arteta's young guns finished five points behind arguably English football's greatest ever team – but took little solace from that, having topped the table every matchday from late August to late April bar one. The collapse cut so deep because it felt so close. The Gunners aren't the plucky underdogs any more, though. Bukayo Saka and William Saliba – much missed last spring – have signed marquee deals, with other first-team regulars to follow, and big money has gone on Declan Rice and Kai Havertz ahead of the club's Champions League return. Arsenal are back. Can they stay there?



THE COACH

Young, intelligent and charismatic, **Mikel Arteta** has grown an Arsenal side in his own image, from seeds to saplings, since December 2019. The Basque boss famously learned under Pep Guardiola, and he's now melding positional play with the kind of physical supremacy that would make the Invincibles blush.



KEY PLAYER

The top flight's second-foremost Norwegian defines all there is to love about the Arsenal team that he captains. Former Real Madrid wunderkind **Martin Odegaard** is graceful yet he grafts too, and 15 goals and seven assists from midfield tugged his side toe-to-toe with compatriot Erling Haaland.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

A lack of depth was blamed for the sad springtime slump, yet Arteta had barely rotated his best XI all season. Mentor Pep Guardiola has developed systems at Manchester City that allow for injuries and drops in form; now his protegé must do the same. Successive April draws with Liverpool, West Ham and Southampton is what cost Arsenal dearest, not the 4-1 defeat to City. By the run-in, teams had worked out how to blunt Arsenal, but Kieran Tierney remained hugely under-utilised, while Emile Smith Rowe and Fabio Vieira could have injected the creativity that January arrival Leandro Trossard did show in spells. Finding different ways to win is key (thankfully their set-piece record is much improved) with stylistic alternatives to regulars. They've added more options this summer – use them.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 2nd
FA CUP Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
EUROPA LEAGUE Last 16

TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)
Gabriel Martinelli, Martin Odegaard, Bukayo Saka (15)

THE MOOD
Arsenal are resilient and reliable again. More importantly, Arteta has rebuilt the connection between fans and players that frayed so badly during the back end of the Wenger years. Not all Gooners are convinced they're poised to win the title, but the journey is a hell of a lot rosier than in previous years.

ONE TO WATCH
Arguably no one in Arsenal's squad has Fabio Vieira's vision. The Portuguese 23-year-old hasn't lit up the Premier League just yet, but nor has he been afforded much chance to do so. Granit Xhaka's expected exit could thrust him into the spotlight this campaign.

MOST LIKELY TO...
Pack in the football altogether and become a luxury fashion brand. Kit suppliers Adidas have made a habit of dropping new gear every couple of weeks to comfort swag-savvy north Londoners, usually after frustrating draws to mid-tablers. The new away strip is absolutely honking, though...

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Beat Everton away. It's not just bad; it's the Gunners' nadir every damned season. Each trip to Goodison Park begets a humbling, whatever state the two teams are in. Did Arteta do a deal with the devil when he moved from Merseyside to the Emirates in 2011?

FFT VERDICT 3RD
A first Champions League campaign in seven years will steal focus from title aspirations, but top four looks secure.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

	W	D	L
HOME RECORD	14	3	2
AWAY RECORD	12	3	4

MINUTES
1. Aaron Ramsdale (3,420)
2. Gabriel Magalhaes (3,411)
3. Bukayo Saka (3,195)

ASSISTS
1. Bukayo Saka (11)
2. Leandro Trossard (10)
3. Odegaard, Xhaka (7)

GOALS
1. Gabriel Martinelli, Martin Odegaard (15)
3. Bukayo Saka (14)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION
59.7%

GOALS
88 FOR
43 AGAINST

XG
72 FOR
42 AGAINST

FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Nott'm Forest (H)
19 Crystal Palace (A)
26 Fulham (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Man United (H)
16 Everton (A)
23 Tottenham (H)
30 Bournemouth (A)
OCTOBER
7 Man City (H)
21 Chelsea (A)
28 Sheff United (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Newcastle (A)
11 Burnley (H)
25 Brentford (A)
DECEMBER
2 Wolves (H)
5 Luton (A)
9 Aston Villa (A)
16 Brighton (H)
23 Liverpool (A)
26 West Ham (H)
30 Fulham (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Crystal Palace (H)
30 Nott'm Forest (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Liverpool (H)
10 West Ham (A)
17 Burnley (A)
24 Newcastle (H)
MARCH
2 Sheff United (A)
9 Brentford (H)
16 Chelsea (H)
30 Man City (A)
APRIL
2 Luton (H)
6 Brighton (A)
13 Aston Villa (H)
20 Wolves (A)
27 Tottenham (A)
MAY
4 Bournemouth (H)
11 Man United (A)
19 Everton (H)

TITLE ODDS
7/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

CHRIS TOWERS @ChrisTowers_88

Last season was amazing. To everyone's surprise, the Gunners once again had a fun, purposeful, free-scoring team that could beat anyone. Except Manchester City. And, for some reason, relegated Southampton.

This season will be different because Granit Xhaka – the last remaining starter under Arsene Wenger and Mikel Arteta – won't be here.

Look out for Reuell Walters, a teenage defender who was disenchanted in the Spurs academy, joined the Gunners and made eight matchday squads during last season. Debut loading...

Our most underrated player is Gabriel (the one in defence) – a titan on his day.

The opposition player I'd love here is [*Sigh*] Erling Haaland. What might last season have been, if not for him? Cyberdyne Systems really knocked it out of the park with that one.

I won't be happy unless something is done about time-wasting, as opposition players take turns to drop to the floor in the final stages.

The thing my club really gets right is the unification of the men's and women's teams, with big Emirates attendances for the latter.

The one change I'd make would be the away kit, going by the early pictures. Adidas had done so well up to now.

The fans' opinion of the gaffer is unanimous. He has turned the club's culture on its head and brought players, staff and fans together. The last ingredient is to become steely in the season run-in.

If he left, he should be replaced by Pep Guardiola? He must be bored by now. He says he likes the rain in Manchester – I don't buy it.

We'll finish in the top four. Please remember that when those 'bottling' accusations come calling in May.



BOOKED UP Emi Martinez picked up seven yellow cards last term, one short of Jens Lehmann's record for a keeper in one Premier League season (2006-07)



ASTON VILLA

MAT KENDRICK @MatKendrick



HOW THE SQUAD COPE WITH EUROPE'S EXTRA DEMANDS IS EMERY'S MAIN CHALLENGE

THE PLAN

Altogether now: "We're all going on a European tour, a European tour, a European tour." Sure, the Europa Conference League is the no-frills range compared with the Champions League's high-end luxury, but that won't take off the sheen for Aston Villa fans, whose appetite has only been whetted further by West Ham's victory in Prague. Unai Emery's squad must cope with extra scheduling demands – particularly ensuring that Ollie Watkins gets a rest – while trying to improve on seventh place in the Premier League and challenge for a first domestic cup triumph in 28 years. Yet it's a challenge that fans back their managerial master to meet, especially with the exciting arrivals of Sevilla transfer guru Monchi and Villarreal centre-back Pau Torres, a Champions League semi-finalist.



THE COACH

A banner in the Holte End proudly proclaims, 'The Sultan of Unai' – see what they did there? Just like the target of its affection, **Unai Emery**, the flag is prominent yet understated. Put simply, Emery has instantly transformed this club with his searing tactical brain. A meme at Arsenal; a dream at Villa Park.



KEY PLAYER

Talisman **Ollie Watkins** has been given a new lease of life by Emery. The 27-year-old finished with a career-best 15 Premier League goals last season to take his Villa tally to 40; at this rate, the England international should close in on Gabby Agbonlahor's club record of 74 over the next couple of years.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Every day's a school day at Aston Villa Unai-versity – when Mr Gerrard lost control of the class last term, Senor Emery came in and gave everybody a football lesson. "He basically taught me that I know nothing about the position I play!" revealed Tyrone, aged 30. "He's someone who takes great pride in everything he's got to teach." And Villa are certainly taking great pride in learning from their Spanish tutor. Mings and his team-mates have improved individually and collectively, while fans are being educated, too, learning that patience with Emery's play-out-from-the-back philosophy is more often than not rewarded with progressive passing, chances, goals and victories. Villa scored in Emery's first 20 matches – a Premier League record – and won 10 of their last 15.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 7th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Ollie Watkins (16)

THE MOOD

"It's only the Conference League!" mumbled Jacob Ramsey with typical Brummie self-deprecation, as hordes of supporters greeted the team bus on the final day of the season. Fans will make no apologies, and nor should they, for the claret-and-blue carnival of optimism – it's been 13 years since Villa last dared to challenge in Europe.

ONE TO WATCH

Youri Tielemans (left), shrewdly bagged on a free from relegated Leicester. An impressive midfield of Ramsey, Douglas Luiz, Boubacar Kamara, John McGinn and now Tielemans cost less combined than the fee Chelsea paid for Villa's rookie reserve, Carney Chukwuemeka.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Inspire a TV game show. Villa's Prize Where It Lies half-time competition is compelling viewing. Fans attempting to kick a ball from the Holte End byline to a big 'wheel of fortune' in the centre circle invariably fall over, scuff it or hit sprinklers and substitutes warming up.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Stop s**thousing. Flogging clockwork toys of himself from Buenos Aires to Brum is the only way that Emi Martinez could be a bigger wind-up merchant. The Argentine goalkeeper wastes time, puts off penalty takers and triggers opponents – Villa fans love him for it.

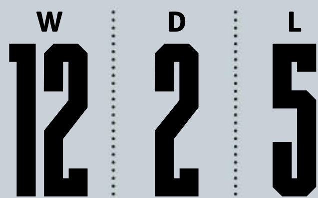
FFT VERDICT 8TH

With Emery improving his players, Villa can challenge for a place in his beloved Europa League – by league or by cup.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD



AWAY RECORD



MINUTES
1. Ezri Konsa (3,323)
2. Tyrone Mings (3,150)
3. Emi Martinez (3,141)

ASSISTS
1. Jacob Ramsey (7)
2. Douglas Luiz, Ollie Watkins (6)

GOALS
1. Ollie Watkins (15)
2. Danny Ings, Douglas Luiz, Jacob Ramsey (6)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION

49.2%

GOALS

FOR	AGAINST
51	46

XG

FOR	AGAINST
50	53

FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Newcastle (A)
19 Everton (H)
26 Burnley (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Liverpool (A)
16 Crystal Palace (H)
23 Chelsea (A)
30 Brighton (H)
OCTOBER
7 Wolves (A)
21 West Ham (H)
28 Luton (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Nott'm Forest (A)
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25 Tottenham (A)
DECEMBER
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5 Man City (H)
9 Arsenal (H)
16 Brentford (A)
23 Sheff United (H)
26 Man United (A)
30 Burnley (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Everton (A)
30 Newcastle (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Sheff United (A)
10 Man United (H)
17 Fulham (A)
24 Nott'm Forest (H)
MARCH
2 Luton (A)
9 Tottenham (H)
16 West Ham (A)
30 Wolves (H)
APRIL
3 Man City (A)
6 Brentford (H)
13 Arsenal (A)
20 Bournemouth (H)
27 Chelsea (H)
MAY
4 Brighton (A)
11 Liverpool (H)
19 Crystal Palace (A)

TITLE ODDS

150/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

IAN WOODCOCK @Ian_A_Woodcock

Last season was incredible. After a dreadful start under Steven Gerrard's hapless management, most fans would have taken just staying up when Unai Emery came in – instead, for the first time in 13 years, Europe awaits. **This season will be different because** the team will have to adapt to rotation and the Sunday-Thursday schedule. Fortunately, the boss is quite experienced in that area... **I won't be happy unless** we really try to win the Europa Conference League. Seeing West Ham's celebrations will have had Villa fans of all generations wanting a piece of that. We last won a proper trophy in 1995-96. It's time. **The big talking point is** how far can we go? There's more optimism now than in any of my 30 years as a supporter. **Our key player will be** Douglas Luiz, who won both of Villa's player of the season awards for 2022-23. The former manager didn't seem to think much of him, but the 25-year-old Brazilian has been brilliant under Emery. **Our most underrated player is** Ezri Konsa, an excellent top-flight defender. **The opposition player I'd love here is** Eberechi Eze. He's a wonderful footballer. **Fans think our owners are** doing a very good job. They moved swiftly to replace a guy who was totally out of his depth with one of the best coaches in Europe. **The one change I'd make would be** to give Ashley Young a new one-year deal with a coaching pathway – but it's a bit too late now. **Look out for** Aaron Ramsey (not that one). After a good campaign on loan in the Championship, the younger brother of star midfielder Jacob should get game time in the League Cup and, I'm hoping, Europe as well. **We'll finish** in the top eight.



EARLY DOORS Philip Billing's goal after 9.11 seconds against Arsenal in March is the Premier League's second-fastest; the record is 7.69s, by Shane Long in 2019



AFC BOURNEMOUTH

MARK WHITE @markwhlte



IRAOLA COMES HIGHLY RATED; HIS RAYO SIDE BEAT BARÇA AND REAL MADRID LAST SEASON

THE PLAN

"We won't be relegated," American businessman Bill Foley said, ice in his veins, upon buying Bournemouth last December. "I guarantee it." Such faith was remarkably well-placed. Manager Scott Parker had fallen out with the club's then-owner, Maxim Demin, over the state of his squad just three games in, with rookie replacement Gary O'Neil handed the keys. Few gave the Cherries a sniff of survival yet safety was sealed with three games to spare, so perhaps Bournemouth's aspirations for this season should be based on their own ambitions and not outside perceptions. Losing Jefferson Lerma will be tough and Andoni Iraola is managing in the Premier League for the first time, but in the spirit of 2008-09's 'Minus 17' side, the south-coasters are looking up the table – just the way Foley wants it.



THE COACH

Bournemouth's first ever foreign manager, **Andoni Iraola** is the top flight's fourth Basque coach, following Messrs Emery, Arteta and Lopetegui. The former Athletic full-back prefers a 4-2-3-1 and his high press compares to Marcelo Bielsa's – Leeds wanted him last term but Rayo Vallecano said no.



KEY PLAYER

So few relegation candidates have a reliable threat from midfield, so **Philip Billing**'s goals may just set Bournemouth apart. The 6ft 4in Dane notched seven last season, running beyond Dominic Solanke. 'Phil Bill' can operate as a No.8 or No.10; a complete midfielder, then, who adds a real nuisance value.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

For a start, stop losing matches from two-goal leads. Bournemouth became the first Premier League team to do so in consecutive games (against Leeds and Tottenham last winter) and later did it again at Arsenal. They must also fix easily the division's worst defensive set-piece record. Shape-shifting styles and formations were still enough to keep heads above water, but in hiring Iraola, the Cherries want front-foot continuity. Billing and Solanke's good chemistry proved vital last term, with attacking January arrivals Dango Ouattara and Hamed Traore needing time to settle. Marcos Senesi and Illya Zabarnyi are solid centre-backs with an eye on the future, and 34-year-old Neto is excellent in goal for the time being. In the race to 40 points and beyond, the Cherries want to push on.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 15th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Fourth Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Philip Billing, Dominic Solanke (7)

THE MOOD

Anything could happen. After O'Neil surpassed all expectations with a team Parker publicly derided after a 9-0 loss to Liverpool, Bournemouth have hired a highly-rated coach whose Rayo side were four points off Europe and beat Barcelona and Real Madrid last term, two years after Iraola took them up. It's either a Foley masterstroke or it'll implode spectacularly. It'll sure be fun.

ONE TO WATCH

After two years out, David Brooks' March return after battling stage two Hodgkin lymphoma was one of the season's most life-affirming moments. The 26-year-old Welsh international was a key player before illness and he oozes quality in tight midfield spaces.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Provide a lovely away day, weather permitting. *FFT* recommends Alum Chine beach and Chez Fred chip shop.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Bond with Luton fans. The Hatters are taking their one-time bedfellows at the foot of the Football League's crown as having the Premier League's smallest home – some niche beef. Following the 2016 Old Trafford bomb scare, Cherries fans sang to an empty ground, "Your ground's too big for you," before the authorities escorted them out. Expect similar ribbing at Kenilworth Road.

FFT VERDICT 16TH

Ruthless ambition saw Bournemouth spend £55m in January, then upgrade a solid gaffer. Iraola may well justify it.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

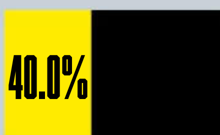
HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD		
W	D	L	W	D	L
6	4	9	5	2	12

MINUTES	ASSISTS	GOALS
1. Jefferson Lerma (3,256)	**1. Dominic Solanke (7)**	**1. Philip Billing (7)**
2. Adam Smith (2,950)	**2.** Marcus Tavernier (4)	**2.** Dominic Solanke (6)
3. Dominic Solanke (2,873)	**3.** Dango Ouattara (3)	**3.** Lerma, Tavernier (5)

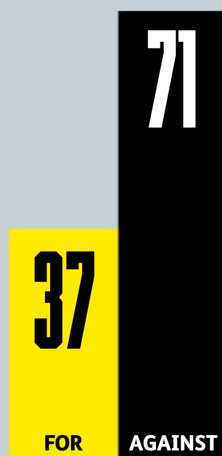
SET PIECES



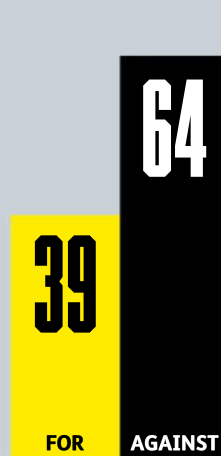
POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



VIEW FROM THE STANDS

KEV HASTINGS

Last season was a mixed bag – great to stay up, but we didn't turn up too often.
The big talking point is our new manager. I didn't see O'Neil going, but Iraola has a good reputation with what looks a refreshing philosophy.
I won't be happy unless we show more fight than we did at the tail end of last season, ending on four defeats.
Our key player will be Marcus Tavernier. He's very creative, he scores key goals and he causes chaos when he's on his game.
Fans think our owner is very ambitious, and so far a man of his word. He's said that he plans to take Bournemouth places we haven't been. That can only mean Europe...
The opposition player I'd love here is Jack Grealish – he has bundles of ability, with the added bonus of the next-level post-season party.
The active player I'd love to have back is Nathan Ake – a wonderful lad and quite simply the best player to ever wear the Cherries' shirt.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Chris Mepham. The top flight is a step too far for him, really.
The pantomime villain will be Jefferson Lerma. Crystal Palace is a sideways step for the much-loved midfielder. Hopefully one of the many red cards will be against us.
The one change I'd make would be a new stadium. The owner has promised one once our infrastructure is in place. Fingers crossed.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Iraola has a good reputation. We're hoping he'll bring back an attacking style we haven't seen since Eddie Howe.
If he left he should be replaced by a young coach and not one of the 'keep us in the Prem' old boys.
We'll finish an optimistic 10th, with a few additions.

FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 West Ham (H)
19 Liverpool (A)
26 Tottenham (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Brentford (A)
16 Chelsea (H)
23 Brighton (A)
30 Arsenal (H)
OCTOBER
7 Everton (A)
21 Wolves (H)
28 Burnley (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Man City (A)
11 Newcastle (H)
25 Sheff United (A)
DECEMBER
2 Aston Villa (H)
5 Crystal Palace (A)
9 Man United (A)
16 Luton (H)
23 Nott'm Forest (A)
26 Fulham (H)
30 Tottenham (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Liverpool (H)
30 West Ham (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Nott'm Forest (H)
10 Fulham (A)
17 Newcastle (A)
24 Man City (H)
MARCH
2 Burnley (A)
9 Sheff United (H)
16 Wolves (A)
30 Everton (H)
APRIL
2 Crystal Palace (H)
6 Luton (A)
13 Man United (H)
20 Aston Villa (A)
27 Brighton (H)
MAY
4 Arsenal (A)
11 Brentford (H)
19 Chelsea (A)

TITLE ODDS

1500/1



LATE GAINS Josh Dasilva hit the Bees' fifth stoppage-time winner of 2022-23 against Nottingham Forest in April – no other top-tier club scored more of them



BRENTFORD

WILL GORE @WillGore

WITH TONEY BANNED UNTIL JANUARY, THE BEES MUST FIND NEW WAYS TO STAY POTENT

THE PLAN

Following last season's remarkable top-10 finish, you'd think the plan would be a simple 'more of the same, lads'. But with Ivan Toney banned until January, Thomas Frank must find some way of maintaining the Bees' potency without his leading scorer. The signs are good as his side won four and drew one of the five league matches Toney missed in 2022-23, and there'll surely be another centre-forward brought in to complement Yoane Wissa, Bryan Mbeumo and Kevin Schade in attack. At the back, it's all about maintaining last season's hallmark solidity, so the onus will be on central defensive duo Ben Mee and Ethan Pinnock to keep up their good work. The problem may be in goal: with David Raya's exit expected for months, former Freiburg man Mark Flekken has to hit the ground running.



THE COACH

Brentford wouldn't swap **Thomas Frank** for anyone. He finally lifted the Bees' play-off curse, led them to safety in their debut Premier League season and then proved all of those 'second-season syndrome' predictions acres wide of the mark. His tactics are flexible, he develops talent and he has magnificent hair.



KEY PLAYER

When Christian Eriksen left in 2022, Frank challenged **Mathias Jensen** to become his team's heartbeat. Jensen repaid his faith, adding five goals, six assists and real quality and control to the Bees' midfield. Repeat that in 2023-24 and the Dane will receive the widespread attention his performances merit.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Don't be afraid of the heavyweights. Brentford enjoyed some astonishing results against the Premier League's elite: Manchester United and Liverpool were demolished at the Gtech, and the Bees were the only club to do the double over Treble winners Manchester City. It's all the more impressive given the Grand Canyon-sized chasm in spending power that exists between Brentford and the big dogs; they have the top tier's lowest wage bill and are only now eating into the profit they've made on transfer fees across the past decade. Their mastery of set-pieces, directness and pressing, and ability to switch between 4-3-3 and 3-5-2 formations, caused problems for the opposition in the vast majority of their games. Stick to that winning formula and show no fear – against anyone.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 9th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Ivan Toney (21)

THE MOOD
Utterly joyous, as you might expect after a fine ninth-place finish. The atmosphere has been only slightly soured by Toney's extended ban.

ONE TO WATCH
Mikkel Damsgaard joined Brentford last summer after a period in Serie A blighted by injury and illness. The Dane initially struggled to adapt to the the Premier League's physicality, but in the final months of the season he showed glimpses of the quality that lit up Euro 2020 in 2021. Brentford hope that upward trajectory continues – the 23-year-old has undoubted potential.

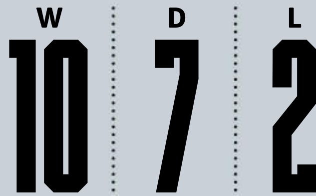
MOST LIKELY TO...
Leave full-backs wondering what the hell just happened is lightning-quick German attacker Schade. Following a promising loan spell from January, the 21-year-old joined permanently for a club-record fee in the summer, and a full pre-season to integrate him into the Londoners' patterns of play should pay handsome dividends.

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Stop the *Freed from Desire* post-match party, at least until Roy Keane is there. Fellow pundits Gary Neville, Micah Richards and Jamie Carragher have all got involved, but the bearded misery is yet to follow suit. More and more, people just want more, Roy.

FFT VERDICT 14TH

Will they miss Toney? No more than they missed Eriksen, or Griffin Park. But gravity pulls, especially without Raya.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER





	W	D	L
Home record	10	7	2
Away record	5	7	7

MINUTES
1. David Raya (3,420)
2. Ben Mee (3,272)
3. Rico Henry (3,244)

ASSISTS
1. Bryan Mbeumo (8)
2. Mathias Jensen (6)
3. Ivan Toney (4)

GOALS
1. Ivan Toney (20)
2. Bryan Mbeumo (9)
3. Yoane Wissa (7)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION



GOALS

FOR	AGAINST
58	46

XG

FOR	AGAINST
57	50

FIXTURES

AUGUST
13 Tottenham (H)
19 Fulham (A)
26 Crystal Palace (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Bournemouth (H)
16 Newcastle (A)
23 Everton (H)
30 Nott'm Forest (A)
OCTOBER
7 Man United (A)
21 Burnley (H)
28 Chelsea (A)
NOVEMBER
4 West Ham (H)
11 Liverpool (A)
25 Arsenal (H)
DECEMBER
2 Luton (H)
5 Brighton (A)
9 Sheff United (A)
16 Aston Villa (H)
23 Man City (A)
26 Wolves (H)
30 Crystal Palace (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Nott'm Forest (H)
30 Tottenham (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Man City (H)
10 Wolves (A)
17 Liverpool (H)
24 West Ham (A)
MARCH
2 Chelsea (H)
9 Arsenal (A)
16 Burnley (A)
30 Man United (H)
APRIL
2 Brighton (H)
6 Aston Villa (A)
13 Sheff United (H)
20 Luton (A)
27 Everton (A)
MAY
4 Fulham (H)
11 Bournemouth (A)
19 Newcastle (H)

TITLE ODDS
500/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

NICK BRUZON @NickBruzon

Last season was incredible: trashing Manchester United, finishing above Chelsea and Fulham, then doing the double over Manchester City. **The big talking point is** how we cope without Ivan Toney. But we beat City, Liverpool and Spurs when he was out last season and are most definitely a team rather than a collection of individuals. **This season will be different because** Brentford are going to qualify for Europe for the first time in our history. **Our most underrated player is** defender Ben Mee, without a doubt the free transfer bargain of 2022-23. **I won't be happy unless** Peter Gilham, football's longest-serving announcer, at more than 50 years, is still on the mic. He remains as passionate as ever. **Fans think our owner is** a living legend. Matthew Benham is even rumoured to pick the first song played at half-time, which made *Love Will Tear Us Apart* as we were beating City on the final day, while Leeds were being relegated, all the sweeter. Mind the gap, indeed. **The opposition player I'd love here is** Erling Haaland, for a few months. He'd have to prove himself – we were one of only two clubs he didn't score against last year. **The player I'd happily drive to another club is** Cristiano Ronaldo, back from Saudi Arabia to Man United. His hissy fit as United went 4-0 down in 35 minutes at the Gtech is something I'd love to watch again and again. **The fans' opinion of the gaffer is** that Thomas Frank couldn't be under any less pressure. Ours is the perfect symbiotic relationship. What he's done is extraordinary. **We'll finish** in the top six. You heard it here first. We should have done it last year; we need consistency.

THE ~~NEW~~ OLD BOY James Milner made his 619th Premier League appearance in May, which ranks him third behind only Gareth Barry (653) and Ryan Giggs (632)



BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION

IF THERE'S ONE CLUB WITH A PLAN TO DEAL WITH THE IMPACT OF EUROPE, IT'S BRIGHTON

THE PLAN

The Seagulls are soaring into uncharted territory. The first European campaign in Brighton's history will test squad depth like never before – and those who have masterminded the club's recent rise from Premier League strugglers to top-six gatecrashers will be keen to avoid going backwards. World Cup-winning midfielder Alexis Mac Allister has moved to Merseyside, and more may follow him through the door, though Albion are accustomed to dealing with key figures leaving. Still, the increased workload puts extra pressure on the class of 2023-24, and plenty of richer teams have struggled to cope with the impact of Thursday night jaunts across Europe. Yet if there's one club that'll have a plan to deal with it – a plan nobody else has thought of – that club is Brighton & Hove Albion.



THE COACH

What more can you say about the man who Pep Guardiola called "one of the most influential managers in the last 20 years"? Brighton fans should enjoy **Roberto De Zerbi** while they can, because he's not going to be in East Sussex for long. It looks almost as much fun to play in his team as it is to watch them.



KEY PLAYER

De Zerbi's risk-and-reward style puts responsibility on centre-backs and **Lewis Dunk** has proved he is up to the task: no Premier League player last term had more touches, completed more passes or carried the ball further. The skipper, who was with Albion in their 2010-11 League One days, is a born leader.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Roberto De Zerbi's innovative hybrid of controlled possession and rapid counter-attacking football relies on high levels of both technical ability and composure, especially close to his team's goal, but the freak 5-1 defeat at home to Everton at the end of last season shows what can happen when an opposition side has no interest in having the ball. Managers will have noted that and are likely to instruct their players not to fall into Brighton's press-baiting trap. RDZ isn't the kind of coach who completely abandons his principles when things aren't working; however, the Italian may need to tweak tactics slightly when Plan A isn't having the desired effect. Improving at set-pieces would also help, as only Manchester United scored fewer goals from non-penalty dead-ball situations.

TOM WIGGINS @WiggoWiggo

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 6th
FA CUP Semi-Final
LEAGUE CUP Fourth Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Alexis Mac Allister (12)

THE MOOD

Things at the Amex have never been better. Brighton's Europa League debut is looming and the club is the envy of the Premier League, with a committed local owner, a charismatic manager and an exhilarating young squad. Even more excitingly, a rare big fee has been splashed on Watford's Joao Pedro – at £30m it smashes the club record spent on defender Adam Webster four years ago – while 21-year-old Ivorian winger Simon Adingra returns from a loan at Union Saint-Gilloise in Belgium, having scored 15 goals and assisted 15 more last season. That's the same path as Kaoru Mitoma, who was sensational after Leandro Trossard left for Arsenal. If Adingra has even half of the impact, Brighton will have yet another gem.

ONE TO WATCH

New signing James Milner, obviously. Elsewhere, Julio Enciso announced himself as Brighton's latest teenage dream by scoring not one but two goal-of-the-season contenders; the winning strike against Manchester City had opposition fans applauding as it went in. The Paraguayan has talent.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Unearth an 18-year-old wonderkid from Peru and sell them for £75m.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Sign Wilfried Zaha.

FFT VERDICT 9TH

Points may be dropped as a genuinely good footballing side attacks Europe with gusto – and they could go far...

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD

W	D	L
10	4	5

AWAY RECORD

W	D	L
8	4	7

MINUTES
1. Pascal Gross (3,246)
2. Lewis Dunk (3,240)
3. Moises Caicedo (3,141)

ASSISTS
1. Pascal Gross (8)
2. Solly March (7)
3. Estupinan, Mitoma (5)

GOALS
1. Alexis Mac Allister (10)
2. Pascal Gross (9)
3. March, Mitoma, Trossard (7)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION

60.5%

GOALS

FOR 72
AGAINST 53

XG

FOR 73
AGAINST 50

FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Luton (H)
19 Wolves (A)
26 West Ham (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Newcastle (H)
16 Man United (A)
23 Bournemouth (H)
30 Aston Villa (A)
OCTOBER
7 Liverpool (H)
21 Man City (A)
28 Fulham (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Everton (A)
11 Sheff United (H)
25 Nott'm Forest (A)
DECEMBER
2 Chelsea (A)
5 Brentford (H)
9 Burnley (H)
16 Arsenal (A)
23 Crystal Palace (A)
26 Tottenham (H)
30 West Ham (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Wolves (H)
30 Luton (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Crystal Palace (H)
10 Tottenham (A)
17 Sheff United (A)
24 Everton (H)
MARCH
2 Fulham (A)
9 Nott'm Forest (H)
16 Man City (H)
30 Liverpool (A)
APRIL
2 Brentford (A)
6 Arsenal (H)
13 Burnley (A)
20 Chelsea (H)
27 Bournemouth (A)
MAY
4 Aston Villa (H)
11 Newcastle (A)
19 Man United (H)

TITLE ODDS

80/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

OWEN WILKINSON @wilka1983

Last season was the greatest in our history and beyond my wildest dreams when I started supporting the club right at the bottom of the Football League. **This season will be different because** the strain our Europa League adventure will put on the squad will make it hard to match our record-breaking campaign. **The big talking point is** keeping hold of our biggest talents, from those on the pitch to the coaching staff, or even the bloody tea lady if Chelsea are involved. **I won't be happy unless** Tariq Lamptey stays put.

The one change I'd make would be the tough stance on taking bottle tops into the Amex. Yeah, you can tell we don't have much to moan about at the moment. **Our key player will be** Lewis Dunk. Our talismanic captain is pivotal to Roberto De Zerbi's style and the starting point of everything we do. **The opposition player I'd love here is** Harry Kane, who would have a field day with the chances we create. **The opposition player who grinds my gears is** Emiliano Martinez. Last year's display at the Amex was worthy of a World Cup in time-wasting.

Our most underrated player is Pascal Gross, but not within the club. It stuns me how little is said about a player whose creative output is normally bettered in the Premier League only by Kevin De Bruyne. **The fans' opinion of the gaffer is** rightly very high. The hot-blooded Italian can do little wrong right now. **If he left, he should be replaced by** some random manager most of us know little about, but will turn out to be absolutely amazing. **We'll finish** 10th if we can manage the squad well around the Europa League.



WHAT TOOK YOU? Going up with seven games to spare earned Burnley a record – and less of a wait to be crowned than alleged Clarets supporter King Charles III



BURNLEY

MARK WHITE @markwhlte

IN THE IMAGE OF ITS CREATOR, KOMPANY'S FOOTBALL IS STYLISH BUT NOT WITHOUT GRIT

THE PLAN

Vincent Kompany's cultural revolution at Burnley has turned the club 180 degrees and lit a fire in the Lancashire town, sparking dreams of just how far he can take the Clarets. Reaching 101 points despite winning only one of their first five matches, they were an all-time great Championship team; the question now is whether their fearless brilliance will translate to the big time. The signs appear positive. In the image of its creator, Kompany's football is stylish but not without grit, and the technical ability of the lads he brought over in his luggage from Belgium – Josh Cullen, Anass Zaroury and Manuel Benson among them – suits a higher level. Besides, they can always rely on Benson to cut inside and score with an unstoppable long-range shot, as he did in four consecutive games last season.



THE COACH

Sean Dyche built a brick wall, but **Vincent Kompany** is erecting a cathedral. The 37-year-old has dazzled with his results and how he's got them, taking Burnley from a solid 4-4-2 block into a modern 3-2-5 attack structure that reverts to a back four without the ball. Is he Pep's heir at Manchester City?



KEY PLAYER

At 27, **Josh Cullen** has arrived in the Premier League the long way around: from cameos as a young Hammer to Burnley's player of the season five years later, via several loans and a rebirth at Kompany's Anderlecht. The Irish midfielder is the beating heart of this team, pumping lifeblood to its attackers.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Play with the same courage as they did in the Championship. Sticking to principles has worked for several sides promoted to the Premier League, and Kompany's success is rooted in the same philosophy as other Guardiola disciples: don't sacrifice your ideals; adapt your methods. Burnley won't always dominate possession, nor be free to attack with the same ferocity, but they also provide a threat on the counter and will back themselves to beat teams either way. And, if they can make Turf Moor their happy place after losing just once in 26 games there last season (to QPR, having had 80 per cent possession), then home form could be crucial. Nobody will be relishing a trip to Lancashire – perhaps not even Pep Guardiola, who will pay a high-profile visit to his protégé on opening night...

LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP Winners
FA CUP Quarter-Final
LEAGUE CUP Fourth Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Nathan Tella (19)

THE MOOD
Intrigue and excitement. Under Dyche, Burnley won two promotions, had six seasons in the top flight and enjoyed a brief European jaunt, but it didn't feel like this. Burnley, with a much better footballing side, could now surprise the Premier League in a very different way.

ONE TO WATCH
Scott Twine was walloping worldies in League One for MK Dons 18 months ago, and now, having just turned 24, he completes his rise from non-league to Premier League. A long-term injury impacted his first year at Burnley yet he returned in style last term, scoring free-kicks against West Brom and Cardiff – he's ready for the big time.

MOST LIKELY TO...
Deliver announcement videos that put everyone else to shame. Last season featured reenactments of everything from *The Generation Game* and *Fawlty Towers* (ask your dad) to *Minions* and *Stranger Things*. Over to you, admin.

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Win our hearts with a mere sponsor. Last term, Classic Football Shirts was splashed across the Clarets' outfits, combining jersey culture with some seriously stylish football. But CFS have taken their logo to Parma in Serie B, the hipsters, and so Burnley are now set for an ordinary adornment. Boooo!

FFT VERDICT 13TH
Burnley should take an unsuspecting league by surprise, even if its bloated middle might bar entry to the top half.

CHAMPIONSHIP 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

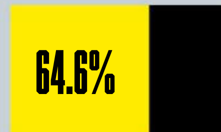
HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD		
W	D	L	W	D	L
16	6	1	13	8	2

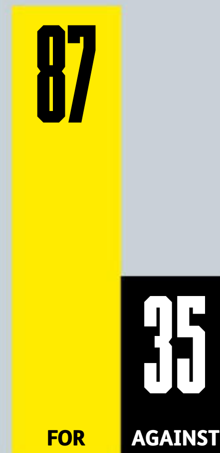
MINUTES
1. Josh Cullen (3,844)
2. Arijanet Muric (3,617)
3. Josh Brownhill (3,579)

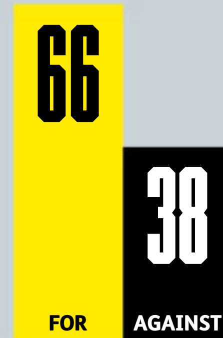
ASSISTS
1. Josh Brownhill (8)
2. Johann Gudmundsson, Ian Maatsen, Connor Roberts (6)

GOALS
1. Nathan Tella (17)
2. Manuel Benson (11)
3. Jay Rodriguez (10)

SET PIECES


POSSESSION


GOALS


XG


FIXTURES

AUGUST
11 Man City (H)
19 Luton (A)
26 Aston Villa (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Tottenham (H)
16 Nott'm Forest (A)
23 Man United (H)
30 Newcastle (A)
OCTOBER
7 Chelsea (H)
21 Brentford (A)
28 Bournemouth (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Crystal Palace (H)
11 Arsenal (A)
25 West Ham (H)
DECEMBER
2 Sheff United (H)
5 Wolves (A)
9 Brighton (A)
16 Everton (H)
23 Fulham (A)
26 Liverpool (H)
30 Aston Villa (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Luton (H)
31 Man City (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Fulham (H)
10 Liverpool (A)
17 Arsenal (H)
24 Crystal Palace (A)
MARCH
2 Bournemouth (H)
9 West Ham (A)
16 Brentford (H)
30 Chelsea (A)
APRIL
2 Wolves (H)
6 Everton (A)
13 Brighton (H)
20 Sheff United (A)
27 Man United (A)
MAY
4 Newcastle (H)
11 Tottenham (A)
19 Nott'm Forest (H)

TITLE ODDS
1000/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

NATALIE BROMLEY @nonaynever

Last season was incredible: winning the league in style – *and at Ewood Park* – after spending so long grinding out Premier League survival. We're a club reborn and we have zero intention of just making up the numbers.
Our key player will be the beautifully entertaining winger, Manuel Benson.
Our most underrated player is the ever-present midfield general, Josh Cullen. His passing is phenomenal, but it's his selfless work rate that really stands out.
I'm least looking forward to playing Everton, if Sean Dyche is there. Just... urgh.

Fans think our owner is more reliable than initially thought! Fans were split when ALK bought the club, but the owners have made brilliant progress. The bond between board, fans and community is building nicely.
The one change I'd make would be banning gambling adverts. As a society we have a responsibility to try to stamp out addictions, and the relentless push of football betting, especially mid-match, doesn't help.
The active player I'd love to have back is Kieran Trippier – he's still the best full-back I've ever seen.

The pantomime villain will be the increasingly petulant Jurgen Klopp. His behaviour towards officials is appalling, but he gets to hide behind this 'genial German' persona.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that we don't know what we've done to deserve Vincent Kompany. Relentless in his pursuit of success, he's humble and ambitious. Last year he said we "weren't the best team in the league", we were "the 21st best team in the country", and he won't rest until we're the best. He will be a Champions League manager very soon.
We'll finish 15th.



DOWN AND OUT BLUES Chelsea won 30 fewer points last season (44) than in 2021-22 (74); only three sides in Premier League history have regressed further



CHELSEA

GARRY HAYES @garryhayes

ATTACKING PLANS ARE NEEDED, AFTER THEIR WORST GOAL TALLY IN A SEASON SINCE 1924

THE PLAN

'Plan' and 'Chelsea' – now there's an oxymoron. After positivity last summer, the Blues lurched from one disaster to another. Under four managers – let's include Bruno Saltor's solitary game – a team of pushovers deserved its bottom-half finish, closer in points tally to Leeds in 19th than Brentford in 9th. Mauricio Pochettino needs time to drill a wide array of talent; Enzo Fernandez instantly impressed and Noni Madueke ended 2022-23 strongly, but Mykhailo Mudryk requires minutes. Supporters may not mind losing Kalidou Koulibaly and Edouard Mendy, but Champions League hero Kai Havertz, N'Golo Kante, Mateo Kovacic and Mason Mount (three of them to their English rivals) hit much harder. Pochettino has taken on the mother of all rebuilds – there could be more pain before things can get better.



THE COACH

Mauricio Pochettino is either an absolute genius or a fool for taking the Chelsea gig, and not just for its effect on his Spurs legacy: failing in this mammoth task could damage his credentials. As at PSG, success is demanded – he won't be given time to develop players over a few years, and that's his main strength.



KEY PLAYER

Only **Thiago Silva** and Ben Chilwell are anything close to regulars from Chelsea's 2020 summer transfer arrivals. Nearly 39, the Brazilian is entering his fourth campaign and it says a lot about the Blues' recent recruitment that he remains the best central defender at the club. He's essential, but starting to creak.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Where to start, after their worst points haul since the 1980s? Maybe with spending nearly £300m in January – taking the season's total in excess of half a billion – and expecting it not to utterly destabilise the first team. The squad was so bloated, players were changing in corridors at Cobham, with training-ground dressing rooms too small to accommodate 30 senior pros. Even for optics, let alone the impact on morale and the manager's ability to coach, trimming is vital. Owner Todd Boehly mustn't plough into managerial changes, also. From Thomas Tuchel's premature sacking to the hasty hiring of Graham Potter and then Frank Lampard's failed vibes appointment, the season slid into oblivion. Attacking plans are needed – 38 league goals was Chelsea's worst return since 1924.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 12th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE Quarter-Final

TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)
Kai Havertz, Raheem Sterling (9)

THE MOOD
Doom and gloom. Change doesn't have to be a bad thing, but there's been so much of it at Stamford Bridge that fans are wondering what club they're supporting. Chelsea lack any real culture from yesteryear – Messrs Terry, Drogba et al must be fuming – and the team is light-years behind its rivals. Is it really only two years since the Blues were champions of Europe?

ONE TO WATCH
Finding a consistent goalscorer has tormented Chelsea since Diego Costa left; although new arrival Christopher Nkunku (left) may not be an out-and-out No.9, the hope is the 25-year-old can match last season's strike rate of a Bundesliga goal every 119 minutes (16 in all), or his Champions League glut in 2021-22. And he's pretty rapid.

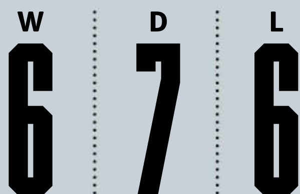
MOST LIKELY TO...
Win the title. No, really. Remember when Antonio Conte arrived in west London? Chelsea had just finished 10th and were a shambles, but with no European football in 2016-17, the Italian whipped them into shape and the Blues ran away with the league.

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Be frugal. Clearlake Capital and Boehly have money and love shifting it. Let's face it: they probably have another transfer record in them this summer.

FFT VERDICT 5TH

Pochettino may rebuild the Blues from a car crash of a season, but it won't be instant – much to Boehly's displeasure.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER





	W	D	L
HOME RECORD	6	7	6
AWAY RECORD	5	4	10

MINUTES
1. Kai Havertz (2,580)
2. Kepa Arrizabalaga (2,566)
3. Thiago Silva (2,352)

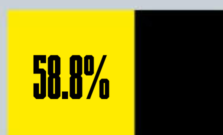
ASSISTS
1. Hakim Ziyech, Raheem Sterling (3)
3. Seven players (2)

GOALS
1. Kai Havertz (7)
2. Raheem Sterling (6)
3. Joao Felix (4)

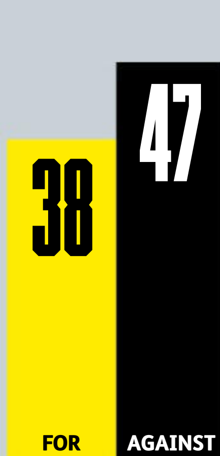
SET PIECES



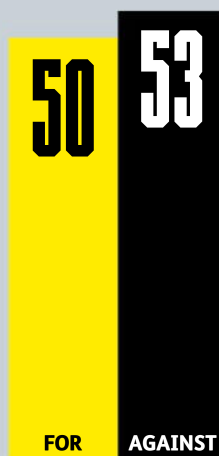
POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



FIXTURES

AUGUST
13 Liverpool (H)
19 West Ham (A)
26 Luton (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Nott'm Forest (H)
16 Bournemouth (A)
23 Aston Villa (H)
30 Fulham (A)
OCTOBER
7 Burnley (A)
21 Arsenal (H)
28 Brentford (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Tottenham (A)
11 Man City (H)
25 Newcastle (A)
DECEMBER
2 Brighton (H)
6 Man United (A)
9 Everton (A)
16 Sheff United (H)
23 Wolves (A)
26 Crystal Palace (H)
30 Luton (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Fulham (H)
31 Liverpool (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Wolves (H)
10 Crystal Palace (A)
17 Man City (A)
24 Tottenham (H)
MARCH
2 Brentford (A)
9 Newcastle (H)
16 Arsenal (A)
30 Burnley (H)
APRIL
3 Man United (H)
6 Sheff United (A)
13 Everton (H)
20 Brighton (A)
27 Aston Villa (H)
MAY
4 West Ham (H)
11 Nott'm Forest (A)
19 Bournemouth (H)

TITLE ODDS
20/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

RORY JENNINGS @Chelsearory

Last season was the worst we've ever had. Previous painful seasons at least had redeemable qualities: the team that could have gone down in 1995 had likeable, relatable players who cared about the club, and the side that was relegated in 1988 scored 12 more goals than the billion-pound squad we assembled last time out.
The big talking point is Todd Boehly. The way he ran the club into the ground within a year of taking over was just disgusting, and his arrogance knows no bounds. The idiot may as well have stuck himself up front.

Our key player will be Enzo Fernandez. In N'Golo Kante, Mateo Kovacic and Mason Mount, arguably our three best midfielders are leaving, so it really is essential that our World Cup-winning big-money signing steps up.
Our most underrated player is Ben Chilwell, clearly England's best left-back.
The opposition player I'd love here is Harry Kane – ridiculously good, and wasted at Tottenham. He's capable of replacing Karim Benzema at Real Madrid and winning a European Cup and Ballon d'Or, so his lack of drive has been infuriating.

The thing my club really gets right is that we are very principled as fans, and always have been. We were hostile to Rafael Benitez before he was Chelsea's manager, and we were hostile to him after we won a trophy with him. Principle.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is hopeful. There is a slight wariness about his Tottenham connections, but we're desperate for him to deliver so we're giving him the benefit of the doubt.
Look out for Noni Madueke and Carney Chukwuemeka.
We'll finish 6th, if things go particularly well.



WAYWARD Palace are the first Premier League team since 2003-04 not to have a shot on target in three straight games (vs Liverpool, Aston Villa and Man City)



CRYSTAL PALACE

GREG LEA @GregLeaFootball

AFTER A DECADE IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE, THERE'S A DESIRE TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP

THE PLAN

Push for the top 10. Crystal Palace have largely avoided nail-biting relegation dogfights, but after a decade in the Premier League there's a desire to take the next step. For seven years in a row, they have finished between 11th and 14th – solid but hardly spectacular. Financial constraints make breaking into the top half tricky, and Leicester's relegation serves as a reminder that survival can't be taken for granted, but Palace can ape the success of fellow Londoners Brentford and Fulham. Key is the Eagles' smart youth recruitment close to home. Tyrick Mitchell (born in Brent), Jesurun Rak-Sakyi (Southwark), Ebere Eze (Greenwich), Michael Olise (Hammersmith) and Marc Guehi (raised in Bromley from the age of one) all joined aged 16-22 in the past seven years and they feel the connection.



THE COACH

Roy Hodgson showed that age is just a number last season, having re-energised Patrick Vieira's drifting squad to steer Palace clear of the drop, while playing surprisingly swashbuckling football. The local lad turns 76 before the opening day of the 2023-24 campaign, but there's life in the old Hodge yet.



KEY PLAYER

After a promising debut campaign, **Michael Olise** added consistency last term. The silky winger can twist the blood of experienced full-backs and his 13 goal involvements – including 11 assists and a stunning late free-kick against Manchester United – contributed to a third of Palace's goals. The sky's the limit.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Play your best players. Eze ended the season in magnificent form under Hodgson, finishing as Palace's top scorer and earning an England call-up, but for long periods Patrick Vieira could find no way to get him into the team. Palace must devise a system to bring out the best of Eze and Olise without sacrificing cohesion nor balance. Hodgson's 10-match spell showed promise, yielding just two defeats and a sublime second half in the 5-1 romp away at Leeds, having won one of their previous 15 outings. It'd also be handy if they started games quicker. Too often last season, the Eagles hit the ground trudging: they conceded the opening goal 23 times – only West Ham and relegated Southampton had worse records – and were 17th in the first-half table. That has to improve.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 11th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Eberechi Eze (10)

THE MOOD

Revitalised, thanks to Hodgson's front-foot style of play, defined by a celebratory Selhurst Park after the final game of 2022-23. An inability (or unwillingness, depending on your view) to splash too much cash this summer has left some fans irritated, despite the shrewd acquisition of Jefferson Lerma on a free transfer from Bournemouth, but the broader shift to a recruitment model centred on acquiring young, hungry players with resale value remains popular.

ONE TO WATCH

Naouirou Ahamada has played just 88 minutes of Premier League football since his January switch from Stuttgart, but the Londoners have high hopes for the 21-year-old box-to-box midfielder.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Appoint an experienced British boss if things go badly. In their hour of need, Palace have turned to Tony Pulis, Neil Warnock (twice), Alan Pardew, Sam Allardyce and Roy Hodgson (twice) all in mid-season. Is 'Arry available?

LEAST LIKELY TO...

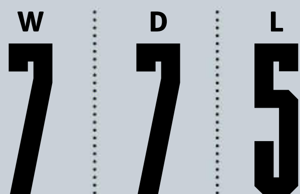
Have a striker get into double figures. Odsonne Edouard and Jean-Philippe Mateta have underwhelmed. Christian Benteke remains the only forward to notch more than 10 goals in a season since Palace's promotion in 2013.

FFT VERDICT 11TH

A focus on young London-based talent has given Palace a bright future, with headmasterly Hodgson a steady hand.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER





	W	D	L
HOME RECORD	7	7	5
AWAY RECORD	4	5	10

MINUTES
1. Marc Guehi (3,330)
2. Tyrick Mitchell (2,896)
3. Cheick Doucoure (2,786)

ASSISTS
1. Michael Olise (11)
2. Ebere Eze (4)
3. Jordan Ayew, Doucoure (3)

GOALS
1. Ebere Eze (10)
2. Wilfried Zaha (7)
3. Odsonne Edouard (5)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Sheff United (A)
19 Arsenal (H)
26 Brentford (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Wolves (H)
16 Aston Villa (A)
23 Fulham (H)
30 Man United (A)
OCTOBER
7 Nott'm Forest (H)
21 Newcastle (A)
28 Tottenham (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Burnley (A)
11 Everton (H)
25 Luton (A)
DECEMBER
2 West Ham (A)
5 Bournemouth (H)
9 Liverpool (H)
16 Man City (A)
23 Brighton (H)
26 Chelsea (A)
30 Brentford (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Arsenal (A)
30 Sheff United (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Brighton (A)
10 Chelsea (H)
17 Everton (A)
24 Burnley (H)
MARCH
2 Tottenham (A)
9 Luton (H)
16 Newcastle (H)
30 Nott'm Forest (A)
APRIL
2 Bournemouth (A)
6 Man City (H)
13 Liverpool (A)
20 West Ham (H)
27 Fulham (A)
MAY
4 Man United (H)
11 Wolves (A)
19 Aston Villa (H)

TITLE ODDS

500/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

JACK PIERCE @Jackpierce88

Last season was saved by the bold call of replacing Patrick Vieira with Roy Hodgson, whose return improved the form of key players and led us safely from a relegation scrap.
The big talking point is what the future looks like without Wilfried Zaha. A lot of pressure will fall upon the young shoulders of Ebere Eze and Michael Olise.
Our key player will be Eze. He was sensational towards the end of last season. Build the whole team around him.
Look out for young Jesurun Rak-Sakyi, whose numbers on loan at Charlton in League One last term were brilliant. He could feature, if he isn't loaned to the Championship.
Our most underrated player is Cheick Doucoure. Fans' Player of the Year in his first season, Doucoure went under the radar elsewhere. He's excellent in every facet.
The active player I'd love to have back is Aaron Wan-Bissaka, if Manchester United don't want him.
Fans think our owner is playing it too safe but he is, without doubt, the most successful chairman in our history. Steve Parish deserves much better than the abuse he receives on social media.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is James Maddison. At Selhurst Park in April, he threw a game-long tantrum and did his own team no favours whatsoever.
I'm least looking forward to playing Luton away. The rush for tickets is going to be crazy, but for those lucky enough to go the novelty will wear off very quickly.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is respectful. Roy's wiliness will keep us safe, but some see his re-appointment as a real lack of ambition.
We'll finish 10th: mid-table again, but on the first page of the *Match of the Day* table.



HOME COMFORTS Everton were one of four Premier League clubs who won only two or fewer of their 19 away games in 2022-23 – and three of them survived



EVERTON

JIM KEOGHAN @Jim_Keoghan

MID-TABLE MEDIOCRITY AND SIGNS OF A PLAN WOULD BE VIEWED AS A 'SUCCESSFUL' SEASON

THE PLAN

Sean Dyche wasn't brought in only to be a firefighter who could steer the Toffees away from relegation. His track record of extracting every ounce possible from tight resources probably appealed to a board that knows how precarious Everton's finances are right now, specifically within the shackles of FFP. Using the funds that are at his disposal, Dyche has pledged to recruit "pace, power and energy". The hope is that this dovetails with a modified emphasis towards young players full of potential, which has already been initiated by director of football Kevin Thelwell. Given the club's footballing horizons are set lower than they have been for years, Dyche and Thelwell might have the necessary breathing space to begin the Merseysiders' long road back from the brink of the abyss.



THE COACH

No one expects it to be pretty, but there is optimism that **Sean Dyche** can deliver a season that's free of drama, and start the process of creating a more robust incarnation of Everton. With a nod to Joe Royle and David Moyes, he is perhaps the most 'Everton' manager to helm the Goodison Park club for a while.



KEY PLAYER

James Tarkowski: as good as the departing Yerry Mina, but not held together by safety pins. 'Tarks' was ever-present – the only outfield player, in fact, to play every minute of a club's 2022-23 Premier League campaign – and has brought some much-needed consistency and toughness to the Everton backline.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

This shouldn't really be a lesson that any club has to learn, but to go into a season pinning all of your hopes on the fitness of a centre-forward with muscles made of papier-mâché, in Dominic Calvert-Lewin, may be the worst decision Everton have made of late – and it's a competitive field. With the only alternative strikers being Neal Maupay and Salomon Rondon, two human goal vacuums, Frank Lampard was forced to recall Ellis Simms in January. Between the four of them, Everton's forward line contributed four league goals all season, one of them a penalty, and – as either xG statistics or the human eye could show – it was almost the main factor in relegation. Strengthening in this area must be the No.1 priority, without delay, because failure to do so could be catastrophic.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 17th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Dwight McNeil (7)

THE MOOD

On the pitch, grim realism: most fans have accepted that, for now, mid-table mediocrity and the sense of a blueprint being implemented would be seen as a 'successful' campaign. Off the pitch, there is a palpable desire for change. Last season the Everton hierarchy waged a *de facto* civil war against the fans, and the majority of Evertonians won't be happy until those responsible for that, and for Everton's decline, are no longer asssociated with the club.

ONE TO WATCH

He arrived with very little fanfare and missed a chunk of last season with injury, but James Garner – signed from Manchester United for £9m, potentially rising to £15m – impressed during the run-in. The 22-year-old is positive on the ball in a way that so few Everton midfielders have been in recent years.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Have the best nickname: Abdoulaye Doucoure, AKA 'The Doucs of Hazard'.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

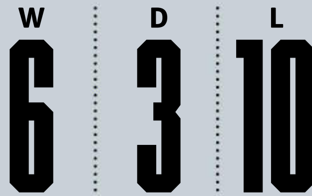
Stay fit. Calvert-Lewin could probably pull a muscle thinking about putting on a sock. The past two campaigns have been deeply frustrating for player and fans alike, because when fit, DCL is everything you'd want an Everton No.9 to be – and memories of that goal-hungry 2020-21 season remain.

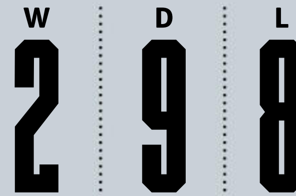
FFT VERDICT 18TH

Fans are low, the goal tally lower, and – whisper it – they give up *more* goals and chances under Dyche. Troubling.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER





MINUTES

1. James Tarkowski (3,420)
2. Alex Iwobi (3,382)
3. Jordan Pickford (3,330)

ASSISTS

1. Alex Iwobi (7)
2. Dwight McNeil (3)
3. Three players (2)

GOALS

1. Dwight McNeil (7)
2. Abdoulaye Doucoure (5)
3. Demarai Gray (4)

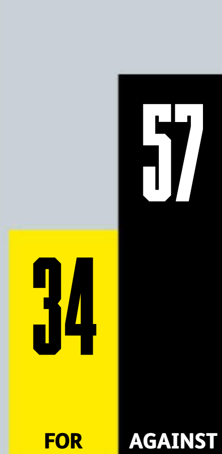
SET PIECES



POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Fulham (H)
19 Aston Villa (A)
26 Wolves (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Sheff United (A)
16 Arsenal (H)
23 Brentford (A)
30 Luton (H)
OCTOBER
7 Bournemouth (H)
21 Liverpool (A)
28 West Ham (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Brighton (H)
11 Crystal Palace (A)
25 Man United (H)
DECEMBER
2 Nott'm Forest (A)
5 Newcastle (H)
9 Chelsea (H)
16 Burnley (A)
23 Tottenham (A)
26 Man City (H)
30 Wolves (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Aston Villa (H)
30 Fulham (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Tottenham (H)
10 Man City (A)
17 Crystal Palace (H)
24 Brighton (A)
MARCH
2 West Ham (H)
9 Man United (A)
16 Liverpool (H)
30 Bournemouth (A)
APRIL
3 Newcastle (A)
6 Burnley (H)
13 Chelsea (A)
20 Nott'm Forest (H)
27 Brentford (H)
MAY
4 Luton (A)
11 Sheff United (H)
19 Arsenal (A)

TITLE ODDS

500/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

JOE STRANGE @joe_strange

Last season was one goal away from being a complete nightmare. We couldn't have had any complaints if we'd suffered relegation.

This season will be different because Sean Dyche showed us that he could organise an ailing group and get results without a proper frontman. If he's backed, we should be better this term.

Our key player will be Jordan Pickford, assuming we aren't forced to sell him.

The thing my club really gets right is their excellent community work. If we were as good on the pitch as we are off it, we'd win the Treble!

The player I'd happily drive to another club is Neal Maupay. He hasn't exactly been helped by our tactics, but he doesn't offer us very much other than annoying opposition defenders.

The active player I'd love to have back is John Stones. Defence, midfield – he could play anywhere for us and be better than what we have. I'm pleased to see what he's achieved at Manchester City.

Look out for 21-year-old Jarrad Branthwaite. After a brilliant season on loan at PSV, and with Yerry Mina and Conor Coady both gone, he could get a real chance.

Fans think our owner is absolutely clueless. Farhad Moshiri was supposed to take us to new heights, but we've gone backwards under him despite hugely overspending. Our brand new stadium is the only positive of his ownership.

The fans' opinion of the gaffer is mixed. Ultimately he did a good job in difficult circumstances, but serious questions remain over some of his tactics and decisions.

If he left, he should be replaced by Graham Potter: a top manager regardless of what happened at Chelsea.

We'll finish 14th.



GOLDEN OLDIES Tom Cairney and Willian became the first players aged 32+ to score twice in the same Premier League game, against Leicester in May



FULHAM

JAMES ANDREW @JamesAndrew_

THE AMBITIOUS SILVA WILL WANT TO PUSH FULHAM ON AND INTO EUROPEAN FOOTBALL

THE PLAN

Despite a top-10 finish and a points haul (52) bettered only in 2008-09 from their 16 Premier League seasons, Fulham's first mission in 2023-24 is still staying up. The Cottagers recruited well last summer – in Willian's case, unexpectedly so – and that will be vital again with quality rather than quantity needed. Aleksandar Mitrovic overcame injuries and a lengthy ban to score 15 goals in all competitions and banish any doubts of his top-flight suitability, but Fulham require someone who can play with the Serbian, not just instead of him when he's missing. At the back, they need a long-term replacement for 35-year-old Tim Ream. The ambitious Marco Silva will want to push on and see if Fulham can qualify for Europe, but the key will be to build a solid base and turn The Cottage into a fortress.



THE COACH

Marco Silva can do no wrong. A record-breaking promotion in his first Fulham season and a top-half Premier League finish in his second – now what about his third? The Portuguese boss will want to build on that promise, and the club must match his ambitions or his itchy feet may be scratched elsewhere.



KEY PLAYER

Costing £6m from Arsenal, **Bernd Leno** has been some bargain. The keeper's multiple match-winning displays ensured Fulham were well clear of the drop and earned him a Germany recall. Thanks largely to Leno, Fulham conceded 11 fewer goals in the league last term than one might expect according to xG.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Maintain consistency. Fulham's record against last season's bottom half was the bedrock of 2022-23 – they beat nearly everyone, including a delightful first defeat since March 2006 of SW6 neighbours Chelsea – and Silva must again target those fixtures. But nor did they roll over against the Champions League qualifiers – it took late goals from Manchester City, Manchester United, Arsenal and Newcastle to beat the Cottagers. Gritty 1-0 victories at Leicester and Brighton typify a knack of winning ugly on the road, which will be especially useful with opposition sides now used to Silva's low defensive block. Fulham binned the 'yo-yo' tag last term and the objective will be to establish themselves in the top flight, as they did between 2001 and 2014. Their manager demands nothing less.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 10th
FA CUP Quarter-Final
LEAGUE CUP Second Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Aleksandar Mitrovic (15)

THE MOOD
Excellent. Finishing above Chelsea and nine other teams was more than most Fulham supporters would have dared to dream for 12 months ago. Yet, for all of the positivity, there remains the nagging sense that some points were left out there. Only Nottingham Forest and Leeds conceded more goals in the final 15 minutes of games last season.

ONE TO WATCH
Luke Harris. The exciting 18-year-old midfielder, who models his game on Frank Lampard and has been called up by Wales, has impressed in the Fulham academy and made a handful of first-team cameos for Marco Silva. This could be a breakthrough season.

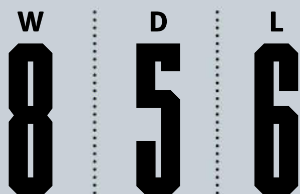
MOST LIKELY TO...
Pick up a suspension before the clocks go back: Joao Palhinha, if he stays put. The Portugal international made an instant impact on opponents' shins in his debut campaign, making more tackles (147) than anybody else. The 28-year-old bagged 14 bookings and Fulham lost each of the three games he missed through suspension, by an aggregate scoreline of 3-10. Ouch.

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Score a penalty. For everything Mitrovic is very good at – heading, shouting, grabbing referees – spot-kicks are not one of them. He missed four last term.

FFT VERDICT 12TH

Fulham can thrill but must be more disciplined – not just with bookings but in a defence too reliant on Bernd Leno.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER





MINUTES
1. Bernd Leno (3,240)
2. Joao Palhinha (3,113)
3. Antonee Robinson (3,089)

ASSISTS
1. Andreas Pereira (6)
2. Kenny Tete, Willian (5)
3. Harrison Reed (4)

GOALS
1. Aleksandar Mitrovic (14)
2. Carlos Vinicius, Willian (5)
3. Three players (4)

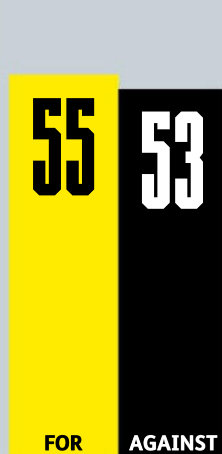
SET PIECES



POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Everton (A)
19 Brentford (H)
26 Arsenal (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Man City (A)
16 Luton (H)
23 Crystal Palace (A)
30 Chelsea (H)
OCTOBER
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NOVEMBER
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DECEMBER
2 Liverpool (A)
5 Nott'm Forest (H)
9 West Ham (H)
16 Newcastle (A)
23 Burnley (H)
26 Bournemouth (A)
30 Arsenal (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Chelsea (A)
30 Everton (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Burnley (A)
10 Bournemouth (H)
17 Aston Villa (H)
24 Man United (A)
MARCH
2 Brighton (H)
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APRIL
2 Nott'm Forest (A)
6 Newcastle (H)
13 West Ham (A)
20 Liverpool (H)
27 Crystal Palace (H)
MAY
4 Brentford (A)
11 Man City (H)
19 Luton (A)

TITLE ODDS

500/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

JACK STROUDLEY @J_Strudders

Last season was better than any Fulham fan could have expected – a top-10 spot, FA Cup quarter-final and finishing above Chelsea. **This season will be different because** we're not seen as underdogs any more. We took everybody by surprise with the way we'd take the game to anyone. **I won't be happy unless** we stay up. Despite that really good season, I don't think we can be too ambitious. **I'm least looking forward to playing** Brentford, despite it being a west London derby. The Bees are a bit of a bogey side, annoyingly.

The pantomime villain will be referee Chris Kavanagh. Everyone will remember what happened during the FA Cup quarter-final at Old Trafford in March: three red cards in a minute and a subsequent eight-game ban for Aleksandar Mitrovic. **Our key player will be** Joao Palhinha. With his ability to put any team under pressure and help his own side when in transition, he wouldn't look out of place at any club in this division. **Our most underrated player is** Kenny Tete, who may be the best one-on-one tackler I've seen at Fulham.

The fans' opinion of the gaffer could not be any higher. Marco Silva is adored by all, for bringing attractive football to Craven Cottage while ensuring we're solid enough to see out games. **Fans think our owner is** good, I guess, as things on the pitch are finally falling into place. But ticket prices have been rising for years and the new season's figures are quite alarming, with an average rise of 18 per cent. **We'll finish** 13th. A slight drop-off seems inevitable. Chelsea won't be as poor as they were last season, sadly, and other sides will improve.



BOSSED IT, LA' Cody Gakpo became the sixth different Liverpool player, and first since 2011, whose maiden Premier League goal came in a Merseyside derby



LIVERPOOL

CONOR POPE @Conorpope

THE MIDFIELD REBUILD THAT SHOULD HAVE STARTED A YEAR AGO IS NOW HAPPENING

THE PLAN

Return to the Champions League spots as a minimum and challenge again for trophies – no mean feat for a team in transition. Roberto Firmino, Naby Keita, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and James Milner have left after a combined 900 outings under Jurgen Klopp, and the midfield rebuild that should have got going a year ago is now happening in a matter of weeks. Only Mohamed Salah outscored Darwin Nunez in the latter's first Liverpool campaign, yet with the Uruguayan's chaotic style and semi-frequent butchering of chances being far from Firmino's cerebral grace, pressure on the club-record signing will only increase. The Merseysiders' late-season run of form, helped by Trent Alexander-Arnold's transformative redeployment as an inverted full-back, must be backed up by a decent start.



THE COACH

All faith remains in **Jurgen Klopp**. Should the longest-serving gaffer in the Premier League depart before his contract expires in 2026, it would be an enormous shock – and doubtless trigger paroxysms of grief all around Anfield. The German gurner felt responsible for last term and wants to put it right.



KEY PLAYER

Mohamed Salah remains the undisputed king of Liverpool. His level of consistency is remarkable: in each of the last three seasons he has played 51 matches, posting goal returns of 31, 31 and 30. The Egyptian forward is 31, and with two years left on his deal, his peak years are destined to be at Anfield.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Liverpool's inconsistent 2022-23 began with a quadruple-missing hangover that they struggled to shift. The Reds went behind in eight of their first 14 league games, as teams figured out how to beat and exploit the Klopp press. With Jordan Henderson and Fabinho beginning to show wear and tear, Alexander-Arnold shifting inside when in possession had the twin effects of adding midfield control and pushing the playmaker into higher areas. It should have happened sooner – seven of his nine assists came in the six post-tweak weeks from early April that revived their season. The cut-price deal for Alexis Mac Allister (above) early in this window, soon followed by Dominik Szoboszlai, is proof that the midfield rebuild remains Klopp's top priority, despite the new hybrid style.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 5th
FA CUP Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP Fourth Round
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE Last 16

TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)
Mohamed Salah (30)

THE MOOD

This is the first time in a while that life in the red half of Merseyside has been anything less than ebullient, but belief remains strong with Klopp at the helm. Luis Diaz's return from injury and Curtis Jones' excellent end-of-season form offers hope following the dismal days of February and a third Champions League defeat to Real Madrid in four campaigns. A changing of the guard also provides Anfield with the chance to do what it does best: create a new set list of epic terrace chants, to soon be mimicked by every other fanbase.

ONE TO WATCH

Cody Gakpo in his first full campaign. The 24-year-old, who's also played as a free No.8, recovered from a slow start with goals against Everton and in *that* 7-0 Manchester United drubbing to become Firmino's false-nine heir.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Block-book all available ferry tickets to Dublin six months in advance of the Europa League final. On the pitch, they will rely on their goalkeeper more than any other club: Alisson saved 10 goals more than his xG against suggested he 'should' have repelled in 2022-23.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Concede set-piece goals – the Reds shipped a league-low eight last term, scoring the most (excluding penalties).

FFT VERDICT 4TH

The Reds should return to the top four as long as they can keep their forwards fit in the face of Europa League fatigue.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

	HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD	
W	D	L	W	D	L
13	5	1	6	5	8

MINUTES	ASSISTS	GOALS
1. Alisson (3,330)	**1. Mohamed Salah (12)**	**1. Mohamed Salah (19)**
2. Mohamed Salah (3,297)	2. Alexander-Arnold (9)	2. Roberto Firmino (11)
3. Alexander-Arnold (2,932)	3. Andrew Robertson (8)	3. Darwin Nunez (9)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION

60.6%

GOALS

FOR	AGAINST
75	47

XG

FOR	AGAINST
73	51

FIXTURES

AUGUST
13 Chelsea (A)
19 Bournemouth (H)
26 Newcastle (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Aston Villa (H)
16 Wolves (A)
23 West Ham (H)
30 Tottenham (A)
OCTOBER
7 Brighton (A)
21 Everton (H)
28 Nott'm Forest (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Luton (A)
11 Brentford (H)
25 Man City (A)
DECEMBER
2 Fulham (H)
5 Sheff United (A)
9 Crystal Palace (A)
16 Man United (H)
23 Arsenal (H)
26 Burnley (A)
30 Newcastle (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Bournemouth (A)
31 Chelsea (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Arsenal (A)
10 Burnley (H)
17 Brentford (A)
24 Luton (H)
MARCH
2 Nott'm Forest (A)
9 Man City (H)
16 Everton (A)
30 Brighton (H)
APRIL
3 Sheff United (H)
6 Man United (A)
13 Crystal Palace (H)
20 Fulham (A)
27 West Ham (A)
MAY
4 Tottenham (H)
11 Aston Villa (A)
19 Wolves (H)

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

MATT LADSON @mattladson

Last season was viewed as an unmitigated failure.
The big talking point is the new-look midfield. Alexis Mac Allister could be a top addition, as may Dominik Szoboszlai. Also, does Jurgen Klopp continue with the 3-2-5 formation that has Trent Alexander-Arnold inverted in midfield?
I won't be happy unless we dramatically improve on the road, have a functioning midfield, finish in the top two and win the Europa League.
Fans think our owners are the devil re-incarnate, if you live on Twitter; sensible but too risk-averse if you don't.
The one change I'd make would be to generate more season tickets, especially in the new Anfield Road Stand.
Our most underrated player is somehow Mo Salah – why the media and football world don't realise what he's achieving is beyond me!
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Harry Kane and his snide fouls that no referee ever gives against England's captain.
Our key player will be Alisson, again. We will still give up too many clear-cut chances due to our style, so the keeper's excellence in one-on-one situations is vital.
The pantomime villain will be Pep Guardiola, no doubt crying that nobody speaks about Manchester City the way they do about Liverpool or Manchester United – clubs who didn't spend billions to win the Champions League.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is undoubted, even with the huge mistakes he made last season. He must, though, atone this term.
Look out for Ben Doak, 17. With the Europa League, there will be chances for young players. He'll take his.
We'll finish 2nd – much better but not enough to overtake Manchester City.

TITLE ODDS

15/2



E-I-E-I-O Luton's rise from non-league to the top flight in just nine years is the joint-fastest in English history, level with Wimbledon, who did it from 1977 to '86



LUTON TOWN

CONOR POPE @Conorpope

LUTON CAN PLAY THE ROLE OF PARTY-POOPERS EACH WEEK – SOMETHING THEIR FANS WILL RELISH

THE PLAN

In one word, survive. The Hatters are incredibly short favourites for the drop, but they will take solace from the fact that none of the last four teams to make their Premier League debut went straight back down. Another positive omen is that none of the promoted outfits suffered relegation last term – just the fourth time that has happened during the Premier League era – which suggests that the top-flight learning curve is not what it used to be. Expect them to carry on with the style that led them here: quick, direct attacks, attempting to win the ball high up the pitch, and a steadfast defence that conceded the second-fewest goals in the Championship last season. Don't assume they're reliant on a cramped and ramped-up home support, either: their away record was almost identical.



THE COACH

Rob Edwards arrived at Luton last November, in the third season of his entire managerial career, and quietly improved on what Nathan Jones had built. The steely mettle forged by the Welshman remains, but clothed in calm assurance; "I'm not buying that underdog stuff any more," said Edwards in February.



KEY PLAYER

Arriving in July 2022 as the club's record signing prior to this summer, £2m man **Carlton Morris** served Luton's style well with his hold-up play and physicality. He also scored a career-best 20 league goals: six with his left foot, eight with his right and six with his head. No wonder the 27-year-old is hard to contain.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Don't panic. But then, they didn't last year, either. Proving that blessings can come well-disguised, Nathan Jones' second mid-season ditching of Luton – for Southampton this time, after Stoke in 2018-19, and despite his Hatters contract running to 2027 – prompted the Hatters to appoint Rob Edwards, a 39-year-old who had been fired by rivals Watford after fewer than a dozen games. Under Edwards, Luton climbed from 9th to 3rd (eclipsing the 6th-place accomplishment that earned Jones his Championship Manager of the Year award the previous campaign), ended the regular league season unbeaten in 14 matches, overcame a first-leg defeat to Sunderland in the play-off semi-finals, and then held their nerve by converting all six penalties against Coventry in the Wembley shootout.

LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 3rd
FA CUP Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Carlton Morris (20)

THE MOOD

Absolutely buoyant. The club's on-pitch success seems to have taken even themselves by surprise: plans to move from Kenilworth Road to a new ground won't come to fruition for another two years at least (necessitating expensive summer upgrades to the Kenny). Back in the top flight for the first time since 1992 and written off from the off, they can play the role of party-poopers each week – something their fans will relish.

ONE TO WATCH

Tom Lockyer has been likened to both Franco Baresi and Franz Beckenbauer by Luton coaches. While that may be a stretch, the club's player of the year will command plenty of attention after collapsing and being taken to hospital during the Championship play-off final. The 28-year-old Welshman, so integral to Luton's incredible promotion, had heart surgery and has been given the all-clear to lead his team once more.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Have kick-offs delayed as visiting fans take photos of the view from the away end's stairs into people's back gardens.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

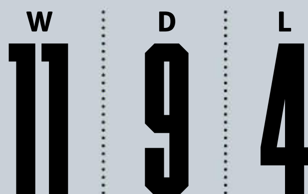
Roll out the red carpet. Following viral jokes about the stadium's way in, chief exec Gary Sweet said Erling Haaland would have to enter through "the other s**t entrance we've got". Touché.

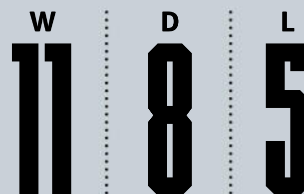
FFT VERDICT 20TH

They will fight, shock a few teams and maybe pin this up in the dressing room, but survival would be an amazing feat.

CHAMPIONSHIP 2022-23*

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER





	W	D	L
HOME RECORD	11	9	4
AWAY RECORD	11	8	5

MINUTES
1. **Ethan Horvath (4,261)**
2. Amari'i Bell (4,167)
3. Carlton Morris (3,693)

ASSISTS
1. **Carlton Morris (7)**
2. Elijah Adebayo, Alfie Doughty (8)

GOALS
1. **Carlton Morris (20)**
2. Elijah Adebayo (8)
3. Tom Lockyer (4)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION

45.1%

GOALS

FOR 61
AGAINST 42

XG

FOR 63
AGAINST 46

* Includes play-offs

FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Brighton (A)
19 Burnley (H)
26 Chelsea (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 West Ham (H)
16 Fulham (A)
23 Wolves (H)
30 Everton (A)
OCTOBER
7 Tottenham (H)
21 Nott'm Forest (A)
28 Aston Villa (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Liverpool (H)
11 Man United (A)
25 Crystal Palace (H)
DECEMBER
2 Brentford (A)
5 Arsenal (H)
9 Man City (H)
16 Bournemouth (A)
23 Newcastle (H)
26 Sheff United (A)
30 Chelsea (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Burnley (A)
30 Brighton (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Newcastle (A)
10 Sheff United (H)
17 Man United (H)
24 Liverpool (A)
MARCH
2 Aston Villa (H)
9 Crystal Palace (A)
16 Nott'm Forest (H)
30 Tottenham (A)
APRIL
2 Arsenal (A)
6 Bournemouth (H)
13 Man City (A)
20 Brentford (H)
27 Wolves (A)
MAY
4 Everton (H)
11 West Ham (A)
19 Fulham (H)

TITLE ODDS

2500/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

BEN BOWDLER-THOMAS
@LutonAnalytics

Last season was simply unbelievable. Last year I said we'd finish 9th and thought I was being a bit optimistic. If you were to tell me we'd lose Nathan Jones (again) and that he'd be sacked even quicker than last time, while we'd appoint Watford's boss and go on to win the play-off final, I would have laughed in your stupid face.
The big talking point is whether Kenilworth Road will be ready to host Premier League matches. Upgrades began as soon as Coventry missed their final penalty. An away ticket to the Kenny is the hottest ticket in town.

The pantomime villain will be VAR. This will be our first season without being able to celebrate goals properly, and we have to pay a small fortune for the privilege.
Our most underrated player is Jordan Clark – although his touch and finish at Wembley will have made some rate him higher. After playing for Hyde and then Accrington, he joined us as a winger and became one of the most astute box-to-box No.8s in the Championship.
Fans think our owners are humble, forward-thinking sages. They call themselves 'custodians', not owners, too.

The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's hard to fault: kind, straight-talking, adaptable, tactically astute and bloody good-looking.
The active player I'd love to have back is James Justin – one of our own. He'd be our right wing-back and cover any position in the back five.
I won't be happy unless Pelly Ruddock Mpanzu walks us out on the first day of the season and is honoured as the only player ever to feature in every tier from the Conference to the Premier League for the same club.
We'll finish 17th and it'll come right down to the wire.

ON THE PODIUM Only Alex Ferguson (26) and Bob Paisley (13) have bettered Pep Guardiola's 12 major trophies won with English clubs in men's football



MANCHESTER CITY

JOE BREWIN @Joe_Brewin_

CITY HAVE SET THE BAR SO ROBOTICALLY HIGH, QUADRUPLE TALK IS ALREADY INEVITABLE

THE PLAN

How do you improve on perfection? If you're Pep Guardiola, you probably spend your summer Googling 'Nathan Jones strengths and weaknesses'. The Welshman had a thoroughly joyless existence in 2022-23 but it was his Southampton team, in the League Cup quarter-finals, that denied Manchester City the chance of an unprecedented clean sweep of trophies. Pep will have slept just fine this summer, mind: in finally ending his club's long pursuit of Champions League glory – 15 years and more than £1.5 billion of transfer fees later, under their ownership – he has scratched his and their major itch. The plan from here, then? The same as it always is: make them even better. City have set the bar so robotically high that quadruple talk is inevitable from the off. You wouldn't put it past them.



THE COACH

Even after winning the lot with this club, success means just as much as ever to **Pep Guardiola** – as seen in the Catalan's tears at Wembley having defeated rivals Manchester United in the FA Cup final. Summer reports suggest that he will leave the Etihad at the end of his deal in 2025, so enjoy him while you can.



KEY PLAYER

While Haaland's brutal goalscoring makes headlines, City miss **Rodri** most when he's not around. Both creator and destroyer in midfield, he maintains order in a way that makes him undroppable – a word rarely associated with his gaffer – and came in clutch with the winner in the Champions League final, too.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Not so much a lesson as a warning shot that's still ringing in their ears. Having already gone to war with UEFA, the club are embroiled in a similarly bitter battle with the Premier League that threatens to turn very ugly. In February, City were slapped with 115 financial charges, dating from 2009 to 2018, effectively accusing them of falsifying accounts and artificially inflating commercial deals over that nine-year period. The club has refuted every charge but, if found guilty, could face punishments ranging from fines (manageable) to expulsion (less so). UEFA tried to ban them from European competition for two years after alleged breaches of FFP, only for the Court of Arbitration for Sport to overturn that decision, so City have been here before and won – but the black cloud remains.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE Winners
FA CUP Winners
LEAGUE CUP Quarter-Final
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE Winners

TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)
Erling Haaland (52)

THE MOOD

Blue flares in the pouring rain felt like a fitting way for thousands of fans to celebrate their Treble on Manchester's streets. From the Kippax to kings of Europe, it's been a long, controversial journey to get here, but nothing can dampen the mood. Supporters have watched their side match their angry red neighbours' historic feat, wallop 150-plus goals in a season for a fourth time – something no other English club has done even once – and inflict Real Madrid's joint-heaviest Champions League defeat with systematic cruelty. It's Manchester City against the world... and Pep's men are currently winning.

ONE TO WATCH

At 23, Julian Alvarez has already won eight different major trophies, peaking with the World Cup, Copa America and two continents' biggest club prizes. Now he'll have sights on beefing up his game time, having bagged 16 goals in a hugely promising debut campaign.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Still be hungover on the opening day: Jack Grealish, whose post-Istanbul partying filled our socials for days. Hic.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Give up their season ticket: 37-year-old Scott Carson – a two-time European champion and loving life – has received one more year of front-row viewing.

FFT VERDICT 1ST

They look unstoppable. If the refresh stalls, motivation dims and Haaland is hit by a bus, then City *may* finish 2nd.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD		
W	D	L	W	D	L
17	1	1	11	4	4

MINUTES
1. **Ederson (3,150)**
2. Rodri (2,921)
3. Erling Haaland (2,779)

ASSISTS
1. **Kevin De Bruyne (16)**
2. Riyad Mahrez (10)
3. Erling Haaland (8)

GOALS
1. **Erling Haaland (36)**
2. Phil Foden (11)
3. Julian Alvarez (9)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION

65.2%

GOALS

FOR	AGAINST
94	33

XG

FOR	AGAINST
79	32

FIXTURES

AUGUST
11 Burnley (A)
19 Newcastle (H)
26 Sheff United (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Fulham (H)
16 West Ham (A)
23 Nott'm Forest (H)
30 Wolves (A)
OCTOBER
7 Arsenal (A)
21 Brighton (H)
28 Man United (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Bournemouth (H)
11 Chelsea (A)
25 Liverpool (H)
DECEMBER
2 Tottenham (H)
5 Aston Villa (A)
9 Luton (A)
16 Crystal Palace (H)
23 Brentford (H)
26 Everton (A)
30 Sheff United (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Newcastle (A)
31 Burnley (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Brentford (A)
10 Everton (H)
17 Chelsea (H)
24 Bournemouth (A)
MARCH
2 Man United (H)
9 Liverpool (A)
16 Brighton (A)
30 Arsenal (H)
APRIL
3 Aston Villa (H)
6 Crystal Palace (A)
13 Luton (H)
20 Tottenham (A)
27 Nott'm Forest (A)
MAY
4 Wolves (H)
11 Fulham (A)
19 West Ham (H)

TITLE ODDS

8/15

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

LLOYD SCRAGG @lloyd_scragg

Last season was absolutely outstanding. With the Treble, it's hard not to feel as if we have completed club football. **This season will be different because** we've finally got the Champions League monkey off our back, which is massive from a mentality perspective. But the main focus will be to win a fourth consecutive Premier League title, which has never been done before in England. Ever. **I won't be happy unless** we replace the players who'll leave, post-Treble, for a new challenge. We got away with a very small squad of just 17 senior outfield players, when we generally go deep in all four competitions, and now we'll have the Club World Cup and UEFA Super Cup, too. **Our key player will be** Phil Foden, as one of the midfield No.8s. He played centrally in City's youth sides, so there's a lot of excitement about it. **Look out for** James McAtee, seeing as Rico Lewis 'broke through' last season. **The pantomime villain will be** the Premier League's charges against the club. **Fans think our owner is** brilliant, from a footballing perspective. The regeneration of East Manchester near the stadium has also been great. **The one change I'd make would be** the reprehensible increases to season ticket prices over the past seven or eight years. It's a disgrace. The club treats match-going fans as second-class citizens. **The player I'd happily drive to another club is** Sergio Gomez – a decent footballer but nowhere near good enough defensively, and our success was partly built on our back four revelling in their one-on-one battles. **Our most underrated player is** Nathan Ake. Most fans would have him in City's top five players of 2022-23. **We'll finish** 1st.



ON A PLATE Bruno Fernandes' total xG created was the highest of any player in the 2022-23 Premier League, at 16.7 – it resulted in just eight goals. Thanks, lads



MANCHESTER UNITED

ED McCAMBRIDGE @edmccambridge

WITH A REAL STRIKER, MANCHESTER UNITED COULD BE A DIFFERENT BEAST THIS SEASON

THE PLAN

A title tilt will be Manchester United's official objective in 2023-24, even if overhauling the City machine seems fanciful this early in the Erik ten Hag project. Fans would probably settle for any improvement on last term's third-place-plus-League-Cup combo, while a decent Champions League showing would also be welcome – the Red Devils haven't made it beyond the last eight since 2011. Ten Hag must also increase United's goal threat. A tally of 58 last season was the lowest in the top six, and level with ninth-placed Brentford, owing to a creative blockage during Christian Eriksen's layoff, poor finishing from anybody not named Marcus and the top flight's fewest set-piece goals. Lisandro Martinez and Casemiro shored up the defence with a league-high 17 clean sheets: loosen the shackles, Erik.



THE COACH

Erik ten Hag became the first United manager since 1921 to lose his first two fixtures, then just the fifth to finish in the top four in his debut campaign. After a shaky start, the Dutchman rejuvenated the team and won over fans with his straight talking, not least in his calling of Cristiano Ronaldo's bluff.



KEY PLAYER

Talk of **Marcus Rashford** wanting to depart Old Trafford dissipated during a sublime year for club and country. Last term, the 25-year-old struck 30 times in all competitions, including 17 in the Premier League following a 10-game, 10-goal haul from December to February. When he's on it, United always threaten.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

It's helpful if you can field a specialised striker who is able to a) press, and b) score goals. Last term, United's No.9 department was initially manned by Cristiano Ronaldo, who knew exactly where the goal was but showed all the mobility of a Chesterfield settee. After the Portuguese veteran sulked his way to Saudi Arabia, his replacement was loanee Wout Weghorst, who pressed feverishly but couldn't hit a barn door: 17 Premier League appearances, 797 minutes played, 14 shots taken, zero goals. Anthony Martial was too injury-prone and inconsistent to offer a real alternative, while Rashford is more at home on the left wing. Signing a proper striker could make Manchester United a different beast this season, especially with Mason Mount adding to Bruno Fernandes' and Eriksen's scheming.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 3rd
FA CUP Runners-up
LEAGUE CUP Winners
EUROPA LEAGUE Quarter-Final

TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)
Marcus Rashford (30)

THE MOOD

While improvements on the pitch have been satisfying following years of underachievement, not all is well in the state of Manchester. Eighteen seasons of Glazer-family ownership have alienated fans, the stadium is in a state of serious neglect and the noisy neighbours have won the Treble. Only big changes in the boardroom and a swing in local bragging rights will truly get Reds supporters onside. Rowing back on a new David de Gea contract wasn't a good look, either.

ONE TO WATCH

Teenage winger Alejandro Garnacho stole fans' hearts as well as headlines last term with some heroic cameos, including a 94th-minute clincher at Fulham and another winner at Real Sociedad. The Argentine is ahead of bigger names in Ten Hag's pecking order, and his stock is only growing.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Find themselves being tonked in their biggest rivals' backyards. Trips to the Etihad and Anfield last season ended in 6-3 and 7-0 crumblings respectively. Returning fans may require thick skins.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Be quite so vocal about their city rivals' controversial ownership all of a sudden – potentially, anyway. The Manchester derby may yet be Abu Dhabi vs Qatar...

FFT VERDICT 2ND

Takeover distractions notwithstanding, United can be City's chief challengers if progress under Ten Hag continues.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

	HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD	
W	D	L	W	D	L
15	3	1	8	3	8

MINUTES
1. David de Gea (3,420)
2. Bruno Fernandes (3,320)
3. Marcus Rashford (2,890)

ASSISTS
1. Christian Eriksen, Bruno Fernandes (8)
3. Marcus Rashford (5)

GOALS
1. Marcus Rashford (17)
2. Bruno Fernandes (8)
3. Martial, Sancho (6)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION

53.7%

GOALS

FOR	AGAINST
58	43

XG

FOR	AGAINST
68	50

FIXTURES

AUGUST
14 Wolves (H)
19 Tottenham (A)
26 Nott'm Forest (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Arsenal (A)
16 Brighton (H)
23 Burnley (A)
30 Crystal Palace (H)
OCTOBER
7 Brentford (H)
21 Sheff United (A)
28 Man City (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Fulham (A)
11 Luton (H)
25 Everton (A)
DECEMBER
2 Newcastle (A)
6 Chelsea (H)
9 Bournemouth (H)
16 Liverpool (A)
23 West Ham (A)
26 Aston Villa (H)
30 Nott'm Forest (A)
WINTER BREAK
JANUARY
13/20 Tottenham (H)
30 Wolves (A)
FEBRUARY
3 West Ham (H)
10 Aston Villa (A)
17 Luton (A)
24 Fulham (H)
MARCH
2 Man City (A)
9 Everton (H)
16 Sheff United (H)
30 Brentford (A)
APRIL
3 Chelsea (A)
6 Liverpool (H)
13 Bournemouth (A)
20 Newcastle (H)
27 Burnley (H)
MAY
4 Crystal Palace (A)
11 Arsenal (H)
19 Brighton (A)

TITLE ODDS

9/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

JAMIE WARD @jamie_ward84

Last season was better than expected, with a first trophy in six years and a top-four finish – an acceptable debut campaign for Erik ten Hag.
The big talking point is the takeover. It appears the time is finally upon us for Manchester United to be rid of the Glazer stranglehold.
Our key player will be Marcus Rashford. He scored 30 goals in a season for the first time in his career, and I expect him to build on that.
Our most underrated player is Luke Shaw – the best left-back in the Premier League, and not an ounce of recognition from the media.
Look out for Facundo Pellistri – having shown glimpses of his talent in the handful of appearances that he's been given, he could and should play a more pivotal role now.
The active player I'd love back is Chris Smalling, who is proving in Serie A that he's still a quality defender, and would add decent cover. He should never have been sold.
The one change I'd make would be to fix the stadium, which is falling apart after years of neglect and in dire need of some improvements. Fortunately, it looks like this is high on the club's agenda moving forward.
Fans think our owners are parasites, and the sooner they're gone, the better.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is genuine optimism that he's the right man to take the club back to the pinnacle of English football.
If he left, he should be replaced by Eddie Howe – Ten Hag won't leave, though.
I'm least looking forward to playing Liverpool. Always Liverpool. Playing Manchester United is their cup final and they often seem to have their best games of the season.
We'll finish 2nd, although Manchester City will probably pull clear around April.



TRIPLE THREAT The 2022-23 Premier League season was the first to see three Newcastle players reach double figures for goals (Messrs Wilson, Almiron, Isak)



NEWCASTLE UNITED

MATTHEW KETCHELL @ketchell

WINNING A FIRST TROPHY IN 55 YEARS IS AN EARLY PRIORITY FOR THE OWNERSHIP

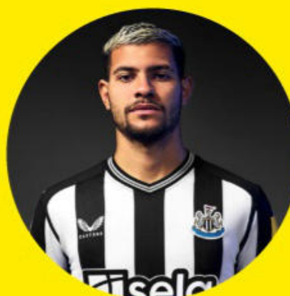
THE PLAN

World domination (while abiding by Financial Fair Play). Sensible ambition seems to be the mantra from the top, reflected in transfer business which has been pragmatic, not preening – and boy, has it worked. Champions League qualification arrived ahead of schedule; now work is underway to build a squad suited to it. Newcastle need quality additions around their solid spine of Nick Pope, Sven Botman, Bruno Guimaraes and Alexander Isak, though repeats of last season's form from pre-takeover players such as Joe Willock, Sean Longstaff and Callum Wilson would be useful – not forgetting Kieran Trippier, who has been a man reborn. Above all, restocking the trophy cabinet early in the new ownership era is a priority; this season marks 55 years since Newcastle last won a major pot.



THE COACH

Eddie Howe is so popular that fans even sing songs about his assistant, Jason 'Mad Dog' Tindall. Tyneside hasn't loved its football this much since the days of Kevin Keegan and Bobby Robson; many are of the opinion that Howe's achievements already surpass the successes of even those eras.



KEY PLAYER

Bruno Guimaraes was absent for six league games last season and Newcastle didn't win a single one of them. Box-to-box, he's prolific, breaking up attacks and springing counters, protecting the ball and winning free-kicks. The next steps: getting him higher up the pitch and bringing out his leadership skills.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Dreams can come true when you hire competent people and galvanise a city and fanbase – 'uniting' a club from top to bottom can have dramatic effects on the pitch. However, beware the glare of the top four. "We aren't here to be popular," insisted Eddie Howe after his side frustrated Arsenal at the Emirates in January, tempers flaring on the touchline. His players' quick mastery of the 'dark arts' was rather impressive, but that aspect of their game must be even sharper in Europe; a sore 3-0 defeat at Aston Villa in April was an early warning that teams are sussing how to neutralise Newcastle's suffocating press. At least facing Villa again, followed by Manchester City, Liverpool, Brighton and Brentford, all before the Champions League begins, should provide a few stress tests. Gulp.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 4th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Runners-up
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Callum Wilson (18)

SEASON PREVIEW 2023-24

THE MOOD
Euphoric. Securing Champions League football and reaching a first cup final in 24 years will do that to a fanbase that just endured a decade and a half of Mike Ashley. There are queues at the club shop again and ticket demand is so huge that cries to move to a larger stadium or upgrade St James' Park – already one of England's 10 biggest stadia – are growing increasingly loud.

ONE TO WATCH
Elliot Anderson's attitude and displays in pre-season a year ago convinced Howe that 'the Geordie Maradona' was ready for the first team. Luck deserted him: hooked after 24 minutes on his first Premier League start due to Nick Pope's red card against Liverpool, the 20-year-old then had his first ever goal cruelly ruled out by a very dubious VAR call at Nottingham Forest. Consistent minutes in his preferred position, out wide, should propel Anderson's stock.

MOST LIKELY TO...
Get their fans scrambling to Wikipedia. Most Toon supporters would be lying if they said they knew who Botman or Bruno were before the Sports Direct signs came down at St James' Park.

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Win a trophy. Man hadn't walked on the Moon the last time a Newcastle captain touched something silver.

FFT VERDICT 6TH

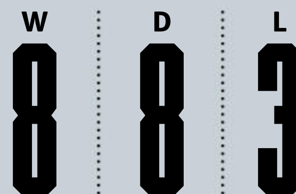
Howe's fast work means they will find the Champions League challenging. Is United's squad as deep as their coffers?

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD
W D L



AWAY RECORD
W D L



MINUTES
1. Kieran Trippier (3,348)
2. Nick Pope (3,262)
3. Fabian Schar (3,207)

ASSISTS
1. Kieran Trippier (7)
2. Joe Willock (6)
3. Three players (5)

GOALS
1. Callum Wilson (18)
2. Miguel Almiron (11)
3. Alexander Isak (10)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION
52.2%

GOALS
68 FOR
33 AGAINST

XG
72 FOR
40 AGAINST

FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Aston Villa (H)
19 Man City (A)
26 Liverpool (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Brighton (A)
16 Brentford (H)
23 Sheff United (A)
30 Burnley (H)
OCTOBER
7 West Ham (A)
21 Crystal Palace (H)
28 Wolves (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Arsenal (H)
11 Bournemouth (A)
25 Chelsea (H)
DECEMBER
2 Man United (H)
5 Everton (A)
9 Tottenham (A)
16 Fulham (H)
23 Luton (A)
26 Nott'm Forest (H)
30 Liverpool (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Man City (H)
30 Aston Villa (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Luton (H)
10 Nott'm Forest (A)
17 Bournemouth (H)
24 Arsenal (A)
MARCH
2 Wolves (H)
9 Chelsea (A)
16 Crystal Palace (A)
30 West Ham (H)
APRIL
3 Everton (H)
6 Fulham (A)
13 Tottenham (H)
20 Man United (A)
27 Sheff United (H)
MAY
4 Burnley (A)
11 Brighton (H)
19 Brentford (A)

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

ADAM CLERY @AdamClery

Last season was "not beyond our wildest dreams, because we did have wild dreams", to quote Sir Bobby.
This season will be different because we are legitimately a Champions League team now, and with that comes considerable pressure to stay at that level.
I won't be happy unless we draw a Madrid team, purely to get the Anthony Gordon song into its natural habitat.
Our most underrated player is Sean Longstaff, although his few absences last season finally showed everyone his importance to Eddie Howe's style of play.
The opposition player I'd love here is Declan Rice. He'd be the perfect fit for this midfield if we were shopping in those sorts of markets. Sadly, we're not.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Anthony Gordon... oh wait, no, sorry – we bought him.
Our key player will be Alexander Isak. When he's fit and firing, the Swede is among Europe's top strikers.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is unprecedented. There isn't a single question over his ability to manage this team that Howe hasn't resoundingly answered.
Fans think our owner is a difficult thing to discuss – undoubtedly responsible for the club's incredible upward trajectory, but with associations that leave a bad taste in the mouths of some.
Look out for Elliot Anderson again. Our heavier fixture list should give the 20-year-old the game time he needs.
The active player I'd love to have back is Tim Krul or Fraser Forster. I don't rate them any higher than the backup goalkeepers we've already got, but we need some academy graduates to register for Europe...
We'll finish 4th again.

TITLE ODDS
18/1



OFF THE BALL Forest had 18 per cent possession against Arsenal in May, the lowest on record (since 2003-04) for a winning team in the Premier League



NOTTINGHAM FOREST

NICK MILLER @NickMiller79

IT WON'T BE DULL – CHAOS COULD SPUR FOREST ON OR DRAG THEM INTO A SPIRAL

THE PLAN

It depends who you ask. The sensible target is consolidation with an eye on gradual improvement, locking down Forest's top-flight status while ideally avoiding a relegation scrap. After last season's 30 signings, some of whom proved to be hugely valuable, you would think the basis of a solid team is there, with the occasional judicious addition needed. After all, the club did spend more than £200m in fees across the two transfer windows. But owner Evangelos Marinakis tends to look beyond the realistic and modest, so he may demand something bigger – maybe a top-half finish; maybe more high-profile and flashier signings. It's a campaign that could go either way: the chaos could spur Forest on, or it could drag them into a spiral. The only certainty is that it won't be dull.



THE COACH

Steve Cooper had reached deity levels after winning promotion in 2022, but came close to the sack last season, as only a lack of viable alternatives forestalled Marinakis' axe. The chances of him still being at Forest next May appear slim: either he loses patience with the chaos or becomes a victim of it.



KEY PLAYER

There were a few intakes of breath when Forest paid up to £40m for relative Premier League newbie **Morgan Gibbs-White**. But he soon became key; the conduit through which everything runs and perhaps the most talented player seen on the banks of the Trent since Stan Collymore. £40m? He's worth it.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Winning games – or even just picking up points – away from home is a good idea. Forest gathered a neat 38 points from their 38 Premier League games, but less neat was the mere eight they amassed on the road. They won once, 1-0 against Southampton in January when Saints were at one of their many low ebbs. Forest scored 11 goals and shipped 44. Only Leeds lost more away matches. So, while there were a few decent performances, such as a narrow defeat to Liverpool and a vital draw with Chelsea, the priority will be to convert that promise into points. The flip side of that was the magnificent home form – in spectacular, broiling, ear-splitting atmospheres at the City Ground, Forest's record on familiar soil was worthy of the top half, and gave supporters some unforgettable days.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 16th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Semi-Final
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Taiwo Awoniyi (11)

THE MOOD

Giddy. Under Steve Cooper, fans have been happier than at any time since the 1996 UEFA Cup quarter-final run under Frank Clark; there's a special connection between those sat in the stands, the dugout, even the dressing room. It's remarkable given the players were strangers last August, apart from the homegrown core of Joe Worrall, Ryan Yates and Brennan Johnson. There were grim days, but the final month was magical, creating a mood that has continued into the summer.

ONE TO WATCH

If Danilo is still a Forest player this time next year, somebody's missed out. The young Brazilian arrived in January for around £17m and by the spring he was making good on his promise. Danilo, introduced as a holding midfielder, has excelled as a dynamic No.8, pressing and being a constant annoyance for the opposition while popping up with crucial goals. He'll be key right up until another club doubles Forest's money.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Be the subject of countless pub chats which include the phrase: "Oh, he plays for them these days, does he?"

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Be the subject of a Sky Sports News update that begins, "It'll be a quiet deadline day at the City Ground..."

FFT VERDICT 17TH

While Cooper did unite a huge squad, away displays were alarming. It's hard to see progress until things are calmer.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD		
W	D	L	W	D	L
8	6	5	1	5	13

MINUTES	ASSISTS	GOALS
1. Gibbs-White (2,978)	1. Morgan Gibbs-White (8)	1. Taiwo Awoniyi (10)
2. Brennan Johnson (2,941)	2. Brennan Johnson (3)	2. Brennan Johnson (8)
3. Renan Lodi (2,222)	3. Danilo, Dennis, Yates (2)	3. Morgan Gibbs-White (5)

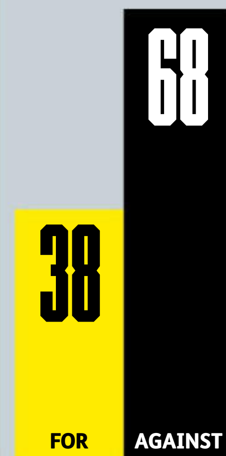
SET PIECES



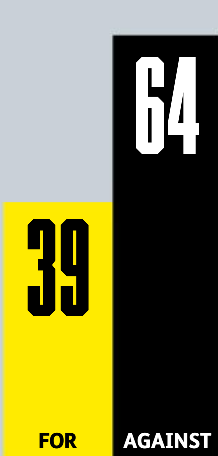
POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Arsenal (A)
19 Sheff United (H)
26 Man United (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Chelsea (A)
16 Burnley (H)
23 Man City (A)
30 Brentford (H)
OCTOBER
7 Crystal Palace (A)
21 Luton (H)
28 Liverpool (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Aston Villa (H)
11 West Ham (A)
25 Brighton (H)
DECEMBER
2 Everton (H)
5 Fulham (A)
9 Wolves (A)
16 Tottenham (H)
23 Bournemouth (H)
26 Newcastle (A)
30 Man United (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Brentford (A)
30 Arsenal (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Bournemouth (A)
10 Newcastle (H)
17 West Ham (H)
24 Aston Villa (A)
MARCH
2 Liverpool (H)
9 Brighton (A)
16 Luton (A)
30 Crystal Palace (H)
APRIL
2 Fulham (H)
6 Tottenham (A)
13 Wolves (H)
20 Everton (A)
27 Man City (H)
MAY
4 Sheff United (A)
11 Chelsea (H)
19 Burnley (A)

TITLE ODDS

1000/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

LEE CLARKE @Clarkey_No1

Last season was chaotic, but ultimately class – mixing it with the big boys for the first time in 23 years and securing our Premier League status by beating Arsenal.
This season will be different because we won't bring in 30 new players over the two transfer windows.
I won't be happy unless we sign Dean Henderson and add five more quality additions to the squad.
The big talking point is what Adidas will do with our kits after winning back the contract to supply our shirts.
Our key player will be Morgan Gibbs-White. The lad will play many times for England. He's just poetry in motion when in full flight.
Our most underrated player is Taiwo Awoniyi or Ryan Yates. Both returned from injury at a key period last season and contributed to keeping us up.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Jonjo Shelvey, a bizarre signing who's been awful in seven and a half of the eight matches that he's played.
The thing my club really gets right is an independent fans' group to be very proud of, in Forza Garibaldi. The tifo displays that the club allows them to organise at games are simply stupendous.
Fans think our owner is extremely rich, occasionally erratic, but starting to learn from his mistakes now.
The one change I'd make would be to have a head physio – we went through 2022-23 without one – and a settled recruitment team.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Bruno Fernandes. In nearly 30 years of watching Forest home and away, I've never seen anyone so hell-bent on handcuffing himself to the referee.
We'll finish 12th with strong home showings continuing.



CHANGING OF THE GUARD The squad shed some 750 Blades appearances this summer by releasing Enda Stevens, Jack O'Connell and club legend Billy Sharp



SHEFFIELD UNITED

DANNY HALL @dannyhall04

BOSS HECKINGBOTTOM IS EXPECTED TO RELY ON MOSTLY LOANS AND FREE TRANSFERS THIS SEASON

THE PLAN

Survive. It may sound pessimistic, even defeatist, but that's all that matters this season. With Sheffield United in dire straits financially, promotion was absolutely vital to the club's long-term health, so preserving their top-flight status is priority No.1 (and two, and three). If last term's momentum can take United to the magical 40-point mark early enough, then they may dare to dream, but there's no shame in a newly-promoted team setting its sights on 17th and looking to build from there. The Blades have a few players who look capable at Premier League level but several upgrades are needed. Much will rest on the transfer business they *are* able to complete, in order to boost the options at Paul Heckingbottom's disposal before the campaign kicks off in mid-August.



THE COACH

After spells at Leeds and Hibs didn't go to plan, **Paul Heckingbottom** has found a home at Bramall Lane on the border of his Barnsley roots. The straight-talking Yorkshireman has player buy-in and an incredibly competitive side that he struggles to contain, making Jack Lester and Stuart McCall invaluable deputies.



KEY PLAYER

United resisted any urge to cash in on **Sander Berge** in January, aware of his class when in form. Signed as a defensive midfielder, redeployed further forward, then unleashed as an attacking weapon, Berge is back in the top tier – music to the ears of Norway boss Stale Solbakken, after his two years spent griping about it.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Give the ball to Iliman Ndiaye. The Senegalese superstar was one of the Championship's very best talents last term and his form earned him minutes at the World Cup in Qatar. He showed he can cut it against top-flight teams, too, scoring an excellent, twinkle-toed winner in United's FA Cup tie against Tottenham – one of many clubs linked with the 23-year-old. Meanwhile, the Blades must get their house in order financially and avoid a repeat of the embargo that left them unable to sign anyone in January. That has since been lifted, but with talk of a transfer budget circling £20m – roughly what they paid for Oli McBurnie four years ago – they'll need to be smart in buying *and* selling. If Ndiaye stays, he'll be key to United's survival hopes. If Ndiaye leaves, he'll still be key to United's survival hopes.

LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 2nd
FA CUP Semi-Final
LEAGUE CUP First Round
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Oli McBurnie, Iliman Ndiaye (15)

THE MOOD
Cautious optimism. United are aware of the challenge yet buoyed by their experience of the last time they were promoted, when they mounted an unlikely challenge for Europe before COVID-19 hit and they came 9th. Just don't mention the second season...

ONE TO WATCH
Anel Ahmedhodzic is the only signing for whom Blades have paid a fee since 2020 – and he was a bargain. Malmo's Bosnia-Herzegovina international cost £3m to £4m last summer and quickly shone in an attacking role on the right of United's back three. The centre-half often resembles a frustrated winger or even a striker, which Premier League opponents will note with interest.

MOST LIKELY TO...
Lose their voices. United fans watched 2020-21's relegation from their living rooms due to the pandemic, knowing they were unable to help by making Bramall Lane the intimidating place it can be for other teams. The supporters are ready to step up this time around.

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Break their transfer record. Manager Heckingbottom is expected to rely on mostly loans and free transfers, as the club continues to feel the repercussions of spending upwards of £100m during their last spell in the Premier League.

FFT VERDICT 19TH

A squad needing upgrades but lacking the funds to sign them points squarely to an undignified scrap at the bottom.

CHAMPIONSHIP 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD		
W	D	L	W	D	L
16	3	4	12	4	7

MINUTES
1. John Egan (3,955)
2. Iliman Ndiaye (3,721)
3. Oliver Norwood (3,528)

ASSISTS
1. Iliman Ndiaye (10)
2. Sander Berge, Max Lowe, Oliver Norwood (5)

GOALS
1. Iliman Ndiaye (14)
2. Oli McBurnie (13)
3. James McAtee (9)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION
51.2%

GOALS
FOR 73
AGAINST 39

XG
FOR 72
AGAINST 44

FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Crystal Palace (H)
19 Nott'm Forest (A)
26 Man City (H)
SEPTEMBER
2 Everton (H)
16 Tottenham (A)
23 Newcastle (H)
30 West Ham (A)
OCTOBER
7 Fulham (A)
21 Man United (H)
28 Arsenal (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Wolves (H)
11 Brighton (A)
25 Bournemouth (H)
DECEMBER
2 Burnley (A)
5 Liverpool (H)
9 Brentford (H)
16 Chelsea (A)
23 Aston Villa (A)
26 Luton (H)
30 Man City (A)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 West Ham (H)
30 Crystal Palace (A)
FEBRUARY
3 Aston Villa (H)
10 Luton (A)
17 Brighton (H)
24 Wolves (A)
MARCH
2 Arsenal (H)
9 Bournemouth (A)
16 Man United (A)
30 Fulham (H)
APRIL
3 Liverpool (A)
6 Chelsea (H)
13 Brentford (A)
20 Burnley (H)
27 Newcastle (A)
MAY
4 Nott'm Forest (H)
11 Everton (A)
19 Tottenham (H)

TITLE ODDS
2500/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

SAM PARRY
@ThePinchNews

Last season was a brilliant promotion season, founded on sheer consistency, and one that enables us to keep hold of our better players for a little while longer.
This season will be different because we're swimming with the biggest fish again now, and that means players and supporters adapting to losing games.
The big talking point is Paul Heckingbottom's budget being well below what some might expect.
Fans think our owner is sticking around for now, and that's not insignificant as he looked destined to sell up.
The one change I'd make would be to have a secure long-term future... dream on.
I won't be happy unless we keep Iliman Ndiaye for one more season, even if it means losing him on a free transfer in the summer of 2024.
Our key player will be that guy Ndiaye once again. The Frenchman's front-footed press and superb individual talents could surprise teams this year. He creates from nothing, and we'll need that.
The opposition player I'd love here is Erling Haaland – I think he goes to another level playing alongside his compatriot, Sander Berge..
Our most underrated player is George Baldock, our right-sided wing-back. He looks so comfortable against almost anyone.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is midfielder Ben Osborn. He isn't up to scratch in the top half of the Championship, never mind the top flight.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Morgan Gibbs-White – never fall in love with a loanee.
The active player I'd love to have back is Morgan Gibbs-White – always fall in love with a loanee.
We'll finish 17th.



MOVE OVER, ALAN Harry Kane scored 10 goals with his head in the 2022-23 league season – the most by one player in a single Premier League campaign



TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

ED McCAMBRIDGE @edmccambridge











OTHER PLAYERS MUST STEP UP, ESPECIALLY WITH THE ARRIVAL OF LEICESTER'S MADDISON

THE PLAN

A(nother!) new era gets underway at Tottenham, as incoming coach Ange Postecoglou is tasked with cleaning up the mess left by predecessor Antonio Conte and his interim successors. Big Ange's early months in charge haven't been easy, with the Harry Kane saga dominating headlines, but there's no time to grumble. This group of players finished eighth last season, outside of the European spots, having conceded six more goals (63) than 17th-placed Everton. Confidence is shot, there's no clear playing style and fans don't seem convinced that the Aussie ex-Celtic boss has the stature to fix things as he makes his major-league bow aged 57. But even so, a top-four finish is the minimum requirement for supporters and chairman Daniel Levy to call this season a success. Piece of piss, mate.



THE COACH

Australia, Japan, Scotland – **Ange Postecoglou** silences his doubters wherever he goes. His tactically flexible teams press aggressively and dominate possession, traits passed down by Ferenc Puskas, his former mentor (yes, really). But are Spurs a step too far for the Premier League's first Antipodean gaffer?



KEY PLAYER

Dejan Kulusevski's decision to join permanently after his loan from Juventus is a cause for celebration (and some confusion). The 'Ginger from Sweden' is a wide playmaker with divine footwork, vision and an eye for goal, and the Postecoglou era could be moulded around his ethereal talents – he's still only 23.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Tottenham's over-reliance on Kane in 2022-23 was genuinely shocking, with over £158m spent on new recruits, the seventh-highest outlay in the Premier League. Somehow the England captain hit 30 league goals – one of the Premier League's top 10 hauls and 43 per cent of his club's entire tally. Luckless £60m arrival Richarlison got one in 27 games. Other players must step up, especially with the signing of James Maddison – 52 goal involvements in his last three seasons, including 10 goals and nine assists in Leicester's annus horribilis. Postecoglou's Celtic treble kings earned praise for their team spirit as the whole cast chipped in with goals, assists and work rate. This has to be the blueprint, but it'll take patience and greater effort from the entire squad, especially those who went hiding in the last campaign.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 8th
FA CUP Fifth Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE Last 16

TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)
Harry Kane (32)

THE MOOD

Bleak. The exciting crop of players that reached the 2019 Champions League Final have nearly all left or turned stale, while those brought in to replace them have largely failed to deliver. A string of misguided managerial appointments and transfers have eroded almost all trust in Daniel Levy, and Spurs' trophy drought has now lasted a decade and a half. Still, the stadium's really nice.

ONE TO WATCH

Having sealed a deal on deadline day in January, Spanish wing-back Pedro Porro was, on debut, labelled "so bad it's unbelievable" by ex-Spurs boss Tim Sherwood, who should know. Then the £45m man produced three goals and three assists in an impressive first few months. "He won't be the first who then had to shut his mouth," he barked back towards Sherwood. "Let me loose in a prison and I'll end up owning the place." OK, keep an eye on this one...

MOST LIKELY TO...

Get on the blower to Ryan Mason before the Christmas turkey is served.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Win anything. The list of English-league clubs who have won major silverware since Tottenham's last pot in 2008 has now grown to 11, with new additions West Ham the most painful of them all. Spurs fans haven't heard the end of it.

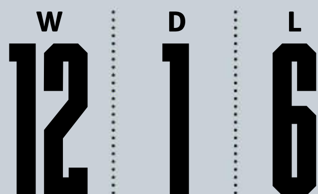
FFT VERDICT 7TH

If Postecoglou has the players' buy-in, he can make Spurs smarter, meaner and better. He may not be given time.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD



AWAY RECORD



MINUTES

1. Harry Kane (3,408)
2. Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (3,133)
3. Son Heung-min (2,899)

ASSISTS

1. Ivan Perisic (8)
2. Dejan Kulusevski (7)
3. Son Heung-min (6)

GOALS

1. Harry Kane (30)
2. Son Heung-min (10)
3. Rodrigo Bentancur (5)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION

49.8%

GOALS

70 FOR
63 AGAINST

XG

57 FOR
50 AGAINST

FIXTURES

AUGUST
13 Brentford (A)
19 Man United (H)
26 Bournemouth (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Burnley (A)
16 Sheff United (H)
23 Arsenal (A)
30 Liverpool (H)
OCTOBER
7 Luton (A)
21 Fulham (H)
28 Crystal Palace (A)
NOVEMBER
4 Chelsea (H)
11 Wolves (A)
25 Aston Villa (H)
DECEMBER
2 Man City (A)
5 West Ham (H)
9 Newcastle (H)
16 Nott'm Forest (A)
23 Everton (H)
26 Brighton (A)
30 Bournemouth (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Man United (A)
30 Brentford (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Everton (A)
10 Brighton (H)
17 Wolves (H)
24 Chelsea (A)
MARCH
2 Crystal Palace (H)
9 Aston Villa (A)
16 Fulham (A)
30 Luton (H)
APRIL
2 West Ham (A)
6 Nott'm Forest (H)
13 Newcastle (A)
20 Man City (H)
27 Arsenal (H)
MAY
4 Liverpool (A)
11 Burnley (H)
19 Sheff United (A)

TITLE ODDS

50/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

TOM HAYWARD @TmDrwyh05

Last season was cowardly, pathetic and predictable.
This season will be different because in new manager Ange Postecoglou we've got a progressive gaffer who'll have a full week on the training ground between games to improve a horribly under-coached squad. It's still a huge ask, not only to adapt to the Premier League but to do it while arresting a struggling team's decline.
If he left, he should be replaced by Daniel Levy. Go on, sunshine, you have a go.
Look out for young left-back Destiny Udogie, who's looked great in Serie A.
The thing my club really gets right is absolutely nothing, right now – I'm generally positive about Levy and what he's done for the club, but it's hard to think of any decision he's got right in the past five years.
The one change I'd make would be the ticket prices. It's simply unacceptable that a team getting progressively worse on the pitch is costing progressively more to watch.
The opposition player I'd love here is a centre-back like Virgil van Dijk or Ruben Dias, or just any competent goalkeeper. Sorry, Hugo, but *bon voyage*.
The opposition player who really grinds my gears is Bruno Fernandes, because he's a straight-up cheat.
Fans think our owner is utterly delusional, cosplaying as a big club without any idea of how to achieve it.
The pantomime villain will be Mauricio Pochettino – at least, it's going to be really interesting to see how he's received when he brings his Chelsea team here.
I'm least looking forward to playing Arsenal. They looked terrifying before their massive bottling, and I can't imagine they'll get worse.
We'll finish 7th.



BULLSEYE Jarrod Bowen was the first Englishman to score the winning goal in a European final since Arsenal's Alan Smith in the 1994 Cup Winners' Cup Final



WEST HAM UNITED

JIM KEARNS @TheHList

AMID THE ELATION OF PRAGUE, A RICE-LESS MIDFIELD MIGHT PROVE A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

THE PLAN

Work out a way to move on in the post-Rice era while clinging grimly to the coat-tails of the elite cabal at the top of the Premier League. Navigate another European campaign while integrating a host of new players. Do all of this while steering well clear of relegation trouble in a division filled with smarter, better-run clubs. Easy. As magical as that night in Prague was, it had the very real sense of an ending; the last sighting of Declan Rice, David Moyes and David Sullivan. Instead, that natural full stop became a comma, and the short-termism that has been the hallmark of the Sullivan reign will continue for another season. In the generation of nation states and hedge-fund owners, one can't escape the feeling that the real plan is to wait for someone very rich to buy the club.



THE COACH

It's difficult to see where **David Moyes** can go from here but down. Winning a trophy was a West Ham pipe dream for years, so the Europa Conference League climax seemed a natural point to leave. Another season of Premier League struggle won't be tolerated, so he'll need a good start, for breathing space.



KEY PLAYER

Lucas Paqueta arrived in a flurry of excitement and bank notes, and after the World Cup found his feet in a withdrawn role. Tougher than you'd think and more creative than his team-mates, the Brazilian will be the fulcrum of a reshaped team this term; any change in style will rely heavily on his midfield prowess.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Buy players with some idea of how to use them. Gianluca Scamacca became the latest in a long line of high-priced purchases seemingly signed due to a YouTube compilation and a glance at the *FIFA* Team of the Week. The ghosts of Sebastien Haller, Felipe Anderson and Nikola Vlasic looked on knowingly as the Italian was asked to play in the same style as Michail Antonio, and did it so well that he was replaced by Danny Ings in January. Even Brazilian World Cup starter Lucas Paqueta was initially misused as a No.10, before a late season surge in a deeper role. The structure of the club's recruitment team is highly confusing, with multiple influential figures contributing. They hope that new technical director Tim Steidten, formerly of Werder Bremen and Bayer Leverkusen, will bring clarity.

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 14th
FA CUP Fifth Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round
CONFERENCE LEAGUE Winners

TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)
Michail Antonio (14)

THE MOOD

The elation of Prague won't abate for a while, but the reality of a Rice-less midfield might be a painful shock to the system. This is another attempt at a transition season, and in a league filled with glamorous foreign coaches, a poor start will prompt a familiar close examination of the Moyes style. Fans are split on his tenure. At the heart of the debate is that familiar mid-table Premier League conundrum: should supporters be happy for some success, or can they demand better football?

ONE TO WATCH

West Ham have produced surprisingly few strikers in the modern era, and 18-year-old Divin Mubama may be the best since Jermain Defoe. A member of the all conquering under-18 side, the teenage sensation has made his Premier League and European debuts and could solve the club's long search for someone to replace the ageless (actually 33) Antonio. Or Mubama could go on loan for a year and join Reading for an undisclosed fee in 2025 – such is the volatility of young talent.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Break into a surprisingly erudite bus parade singalong: Thilo Kehrer.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Be singing his terrace anthem at Christmas dinner: Jarrod Bowen.

FFT VERDICT 10TH

Replacing Rice is *everything*. But with momentum and better finishing, they can improve – with or without Moyes.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23
THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

	HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD	
W	D	L	W	D	L
8	4	7	3	3	13

MINUTES
1. **Declan Rice (3,272)**
2. Jarrod Bowen (3,237)
3. Lukasz Fabianski (3,114)

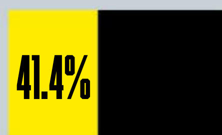
ASSISTS
1. **Jarrod Bowen (5)**
2. Antonio, Benrahma, Paqueta, Soucek (3)

GOALS
1. **Said Benrahma, Jarrod Bowen (6)**
3. Michail Antonio (5)

SET PIECES



POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



FIXTURES

AUGUST
12 Bournemouth (A)
19 Chelsea (H)
26 Brighton (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Luton (A)
16 Man City (H)
23 Liverpool (A)
30 Sheff United (H)
OCTOBER
7 Newcastle (H)
21 Aston Villa (A)
28 Everton (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Brentford (A)
11 Nott'm Forest (H)
25 Burnley (A)
DECEMBER
2 Crystal Palace (H)
5 Tottenham (A)
9 Fulham (A)
16 Wolves (H)
23 Man United (H)
26 Arsenal (A)
30 Brighton (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Sheff United (A)
30 Bournemouth (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Man United (A)
10 Arsenal (H)
17 Nott'm Forest (A)
24 Brentford (H)
MARCH
2 Everton (A)
9 Burnley (H)
16 Aston Villa (H)
30 Newcastle (A)
APRIL
2 Tottenham (H)
6 Wolves (A)
13 Fulham (H)
20 Crystal Palace (A)
27 Liverpool (H)
MAY
4 Chelsea (A)
11 Luton (H)
19 Man City (A)

TITLE ODDS

250/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

DAVID BLACKMORE
@WestHamMagazine

Last season was one that'll live long in the memory, with our second European trophy. **I won't be happy unless** we go all-out to win the Europa League. This'll be our third European season in a row, so our players are used to the Thursday-Sunday weeks, and after winning the Europa Conference League there's no reason why we can't go far with a favourable draw. **Look out for** a few of the under-18s who just won the FA Youth Cup. The likes of Divin Mubama, Oliver Scarles and Freddie Potts have had a taste of first-team action already, but there are others.

I'm least looking forward to playing Brentford, who have beaten us in all four Premier League games, and Brighton, who have won six, drawn six and lost none. They just have our number. **Our most underrated player is** Gianluca Scamacca. When we play the way he wants, you can see that he's class. I worry he'll be another Sebastien Haller: a talented striker who just doesn't suit David Moyes' system. Tomas Soucek is also underrated for what he does off the ball. **The player I'd happily drive to another club is** Danny Ings. Square peg, round hole.

The opposition player who grinds my gears is Callum Wilson. He could be on the worst run of his career and still score a goal against us. And he celebrated the last time by doing the Macarena. **Our key player will be** Lucas Paqueta. He operates on a different level, but our attackers are starting to tap into his genius now. **The fans' opinion of the gaffer is** at peak popularity, but if we don't start well, Moyes will be under pressure once again. In at least three games last season, a defeat might have got him the sack. **We'll finish** in mid-table.



"OLA!" Wolves set a Premier League record against West Ham last October by starting eight non-English players all of the same nation: Portugal, of course



WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS

THERE'S WORK TO DO WITH A DYSFUNCTIONAL SQUAD AND THEIR NEW SELL-TO-BUY POLICY

THE PLAN

Wolves have struggled to get near the seventh-place finishes that followed promotion in 2018, but 2022-23 was especially forgettable, bringing their lowest points tally in that time. They could easily have found themselves in troubled waters had it not been for some shrewd January moves, as Craig Dawson and Mario Lemina added the combativeness Wolves lacked. Julen Lopetegui will remain, despite reports to the contrary, yet the club have stated that they are now in a different financial position to the one that 'JLo' thought he was getting last November – no more orange chips for veterans Joao Moutinho and Diego Costa, who left alongside Adama Traore, while the fee for Ruben Neves' sale must be used to refresh elsewhere, including in goal. Nonetheless, top half is the target.



THE COACH

Julen Lopetegui's future did look in the balance post-season, due to apparent FFP restrictions, but any issues were resolved. The ex-keeper saved Wolves: bottom before the World Cup, with barely a goal to their name, they'd ultimately finish seven points clear of the drop. His away record must improve, mind.



KEY PLAYER

Arriving from West Ham in January, **Craig Dawson** not only provided stability and leadership, but helped to settle the talented Max Kilman alongside him. Loved by the fans, Dawson has also had some gentle ribbing from the South Bank due to being only the second ex-Baggie to play for Wolves in this millennium.

LESSON FROM LAST YEAR

Chase the value! Nathan Collins (£20m), Goncalo Guedes (£30m) and Matheus Nunes (a club-record £40m) had limited impacts. Sporting director Matt Hobbs said Wolves' best signings have been those "under the radar for low fees" and finances may enforce that approach anyway. They must get their ducks in a row: while football's food chain dictates that you can't always move early, Collins being their only pre-season signing put Wolves on the back foot – and even with Fabio Silva returning from productive loans, a striker is needed. The half-retired Diego Costa flew in mid-season and played more pranks than he scored goals; Raul Jimenez is sadly half of the superb talent he was before his skull fracture; and Sasa Kalajdzic tore an ACL just 30 minutes into his debut.

JAMES FIELDEN @James_Fielden

LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 13th
FA CUP Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Quarter-Final
TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS) Ruben Neves, Daniel Podence (6)

THE MOOD
Fans love the high-profile gaffer they'd been hoping for, but a June statement outlined the financial situation feared by most: a new sell-to-buy policy. The clarity helps, yet there's a lot of work to do with a dysfunctional squad, made even more so by the departures of midfield mainstays Ruben Neves and Joao Moutinho. Following several duds from his stable (his huge initial impact on Wolves notwithstanding), Jorge Mendes' influence is waning, to many people's approval. But even if Wolves aren't knocking on the European door, fans will hope for better entertainment – 31 goals last season, and only eight up to Christmas, set few pulses racing.

ONE TO WATCH
Can Pedro Neto return to his own high standards after a frustrating few years with two major injuries? Pace is a key asset for the winger – but he's just 23.

MOST LIKELY TO...
Battle Burnley for the greatest transfer announcement video. When Diego Costa arrived, Wolves found something even he was scared of: actual wolves.

LEAST LIKELY TO...
Feel a sense of justice. Peeved fans perceived a lack of big calls going their way last season, let down more than once by unavailable camera angles and VAR thresholds for intervention.

FFT VERDICT 15TH

While Lopetegui staying gives Wolves hope, a lack of goals, cash and Ruben Neves will make life very difficult.

PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-23

THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

HOME RECORD			AWAY RECORD		
W	D	L	W	D	L
9	3	7	2	5	12

MINUTES
1. **Max Kilman (3,308)**
2. Jose Sa (3,240)
3. Ruben Neves (3,022)

ASSISTS
1. **Joao Moutinho (2)**
2. Ten players (1)

GOALS
1. **Ruben Neves, Daniel Podence (6)**
3. Hwang Hee-chan (3)

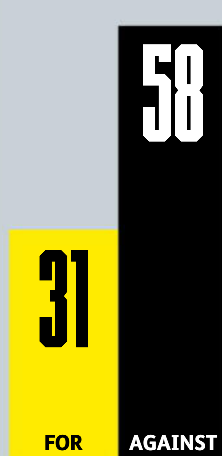
SET PIECES



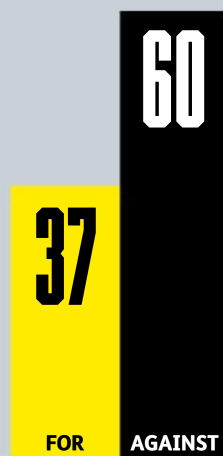
POSSESSION



GOALS



XG



FIXTURES

AUGUST
14 Man United (A)
19 Brighton (H)
26 Everton (A)
SEPTEMBER
2 Crystal Palace (A)
16 Liverpool (H)
23 Luton (A)
30 Man City (H)
OCTOBER
7 Aston Villa (H)
21 Bournemouth (A)
28 Newcastle (H)
NOVEMBER
4 Sheff United (A)
11 Tottenham (H)
25 Fulham (A)
DECEMBER
2 Arsenal (A)
5 Burnley (H)
9 Nott'm Forest (H)
16 West Ham (A)
23 Chelsea (H)
26 Brentford (A)
30 Everton (H)

WINTER BREAK

JANUARY
13/20 Brighton (A)
30 Man United (H)
FEBRUARY
3 Chelsea (A)
10 Brentford (H)
17 Tottenham (A)
24 Sheff United (H)
MARCH
2 Newcastle (A)
9 Fulham (H)
16 Bournemouth (H)
30 Aston Villa (A)
APRIL
2 Burnley (A)
6 West Ham (H)
13 Nott'm Forest (A)
20 Arsenal (H)
27 Luton (H)
MAY
4 Man City (A)
11 Crystal Palace (H)
19 Liverpool (A)

TITLE ODDS
500/1

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

DAVE AZZOPARDI
@TalkingWolves

Last season was dispiriting for Wolves. Thankfully, Julen Lopetegui came in at just the right time to save us.
This season will be different because we'll have a very fresh-looking squad. A lot of Nuno's old players will have moved on from Molineux.
The big talking point is how we'll adapt to losing Ruben Neves, after his £47m switch to Al-Hilal in Saudi Arabia.
Our most underrated player is Mario Lemina. His arrival in January was a huge part of our change in form.
I'm least looking forward to playing Man City. They're quite good, aren't they?
Fans think our owners are frustrating: after some lofty ambitions in their early days at the club, interest seems to have dried up.
The one change I'd make would be the hefty level of influence from agents, such as Jorge Mendes.
Look out for Hugo Bueno. He was given chances last season, and I think 2023-24 could be a big campaign for the 20-year-old left-back.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Raul Jimenez – I know it sounds harsh, but unfortunately he's not the player he was before his head injury.
The active player I'd love to have back is Diogo Jota. Wanderers haven't been the same without him.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is probably Wilfried Zaha. He's a good player, but so theatrical – and a bit of a whinger.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's fairly popular, although his future appears a little uncertain.
If he left, he should be replaced by Graham Potter.
I won't be happy unless Wolves rejuvenate their attack and start scoring some more goals, please!
We'll finish 10th.

CHAMPIONSHIP

With giants coming down from the Premier League and big clubs coming up from League One, England's second tier promises to be a bunfight. As Luton proved, even the less fancied sides can thrive

/ 2023-24

A closed shop in some ways, wide open in others: the Championship is a befuddlingly fascinating league, specialising in one thing above all: chaos.

It's true that automatic promotion races of the last two seasons have both featured a swashbuckling, runaway champion followed by a runner-up cruising to second, challenged only by a resurgent slow starter. It's also true that there's been no final-day drama in the relegation dogfight since 2020-21. But the play-off scrambles have been absolute box-office.

With just two games left in 2022-23, even a team in the bottom half had a chance of qualifying for the post-season. On the final day, five teams fought for two places. Luton ultimately won the play-offs – a massive achievement for a club that had been in non-league as recently as 2014, and a message to all that success against the odds is possible with smart ownership, recruitment and coaching.







There's no denying, though, that the clubs with parachute payments have a sizeable advantage. It's one that Leeds, Leicester and Southampton must seize. The Yorkshire club will have a lively, energetic squad if they can avoid too many important departures, while Leicester hope that Enzo Maresca has learned plenty as Pep Guardiola's assistant, and new Saints boss Russell Martin must ensure there's an efficiency behind his side's possession principles.

The biggest threat to the tumbled trio may come from Middlesbrough, given their form after Michael Carrick took charge last October: 58 points from his 30 games, scoring 65 goals and conceding 35. After such end-to-end entertainment, losing their play-off semi-final 1-0 over two legs could be incentivising.

Their conquerors, Coventry, have new ownership and a manager who can do no wrong, having taken the club from League Two to within one game of the Premier League. Mark Robins may struggle to replace key players, however, and the same could be true at fellow play-off losers Sunderland, although they have bagged a potential Australia captain of the future in their gloriously-named defender, Nectarios Triantis.

Millwall must recover from the uncharacteristic mental collapse that kicked them out of the play-off places on final day, but finishes of 8th, 11th, 9th and 8th under Gary Rowett suggest they'll be involved. Blackburn, whose three second-half goals stunned the Lions that day, went close themselves, and have a clear pressing identity under Jon Dahl Tomasson.

WHO WILL WIN THE LEAGUE?


5/1
LEICESTER


8/1
LEEDS


8/1
SOUTHAMPTON


10/1
MIDDLESBROUGH


16/1
WATFORD


16/1
NORWICH

FourFourTwo PREDICTION

1 Leicester
2 Middlesbrough
3 Southampton
4 Sunderland
5 Ipswich
6 Blackburn
7 Leeds
8 West Brom
9 Millwall
10 Coventry
11 Watford
12 Norwich
13 Hull
14 Swansea
15 Stoke
16 Bristol City
17 Preston
18 Birmingham
19 Sheffield Wed
20 Plymouth
21 Huddersfield
22 Rotherham
23 Cardiff
24 QPR



Things look a little less positive at West Bromwich Albion, though they have an outstanding coach in Carlos Corberan, while Watford and Norwich, so dominant in previous seasons, need serious rebuilds – as do Gareth Ainsworth's QPR, due to a total stylistic change and a worrying slump that nearly relegated them. And Stoke began pre-season training without a full XI under contract. Anyone for five-a-side?

Bristol City and Preston, perennial mid-tablers, will hope they can push on. So, too, Liam Rosenior and John Eustace, talented coaches intending to build on progressive first seasons at Hull and Birmingham respectively. Faced with vacancies in their dugouts, Welsh rivals Cardiff and Swansea took two very different approaches: Erol Bulut arrives in the capital from Turkey, and Michael Duff in Swansea having worked wonders at Cheltenham and Barnsley.

The Swans are in a double-figured list of clubs who feel they can aim for the play-offs, behind the small cluster expecting an automatic promotion challenge – but who knows what surprises are in store? Ipswich could join the top six mix straight away. Consolidation would be no mere consolation, though, for the also-promoted pair of Plymouth and, still reeling from Darren Moore's shock exit, Sheffield Wednesday.

Elsewhere in Yorkshire, 50 points is the objective for Rotherham and Huddersfield. Neil Warnock, 74, is staying with the Terriers for one last, last, *last* dance. Well, there has to be some continuity in the chaos...

Gabriel Sutton

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HASHTAG
#FFTPREVIEW

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

01 Leicester City are the second club to be relegated after winning the Premier League – who were the first?

02 Valerien Ismael [below] is in charge of Watford this time around, but who was the first manager the Pozzo family hired at Vicarage Road?



03 Who was the Championship's top scorer last season?

04 Who are currently the longest-serving club in the second tier?

05 The smallest ground in the Championship hosted matches at Women's Euro 2022 last year. Who plays there?

06 Which Championship club famously made Boiler Man their mascot in 2018?

07 Who managed Southampton to their last promotion in 2012?

08 Which two animals feature on the crest of Cardiff City?

09 Neil Warnock, Uwe Rosler and Kevin Blackwell have all spent time managing which club in the Championship?

10 What's the most populous town in England to have never had a club in the top flight?

1. Blackburn Rovers **2.** Gianfranco Zola **3.** Chuba Akpom **4.** Birmingham City **5.** Rotherham United (New York Stadium) **6.** West Bromwich Albion **7.** Nigel Adkins **8.** Swift and dragon **9.** Leeds United **10.** Plymouth



BIRMINGHAM CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 17th **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)** Scott Hogan (10)

FAN FILE

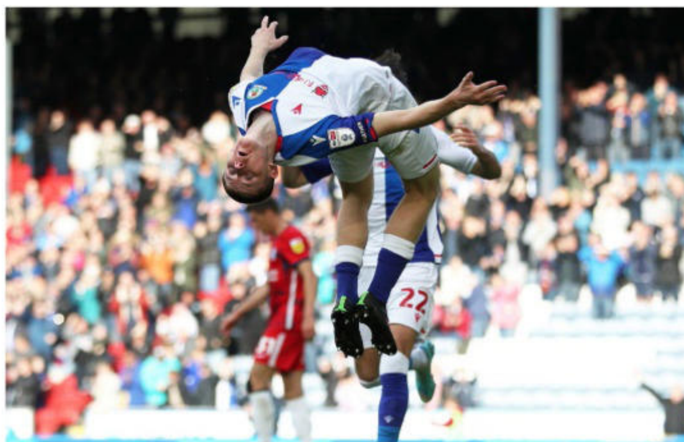
RYAN DEENEY
@RyanDeeney2194

Last season was as good as we've had for a while, surviving comfortably with a patched-up squad and in the face of numerous off-field issues.
The big talking point is the new shareholders, Shelby Companies Limited, and what the future holds. We're finally being taken over!
This season will be different because we have some assurances over the future, regardless of where we finish.
I won't be happy unless the new owners completely revamp how the club is being run from top to bottom.
Our key player will be Tahith Chong [below], who joined from Manchester United. He's quick and direct and now contributes more in the final third.
Look out for George Hall. The England Under-19 international midfielder is set to have a breakthrough year.
Fans think our owner is going to start a new era after years in the doldrums.
The opposition player I'd love here is Luton's Carlton Morris. A monster.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Swansea's Ryan Manning, who got Troy Deeney booked for play-acting. Deeney had the last laugh by escaping him for a late equaliser.
The active player I'd love to have back is Jude Bellingham, *obviously*, and we've just lost younger brother Jobe to Sunderland. I'll take Nathan Redmond and Demarai Gray, too.
The pantomime villain will be Barry Bannan, now he's back here with Sheffield Wednesday. The dirty V*lla...
The thing my club really gets right is our community work. Despite all of the off-field issues, our fans have come together to champion good people associated with the club.
I'm least looking forward to playing whichever club we inevitably have to beat to secure survival again this year.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is positive. John Eustace takes the role seriously and the players respect him.
If he left, he should be replaced by Michael Duff, although our fans hate a three-at-the-back system.
We'll finish 21st – we'll do well to survive, with the takeover happening after pre-season began, cost-cutting, and late decisions being made on players. It's going to be tough again.



FFT VERDICT 18TH

New ownership brings hope, after an impressive 17th-place finish under John Eustace. Replacing the quality of last season's loanees will be tough, though, and Koji Miyoshi and Tyler Roberts arrive with injury concerns in tow, so significant progress may have to wait for now.



BLACKBURN ROVERS



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 7th **FA CUP** Quarter-Final **LEAGUE CUP** Fourth Round **TOP SCORER** Ben Brereton-Diaz (16)

FAN FILE

MIKE DELAP
@MikeyDelap

Last season was a mix of encouraging and disappointing. The team did well to punch above our weight, but we couldn't buy a win when it mattered and missed out on the play-offs.
This season will be different because we've no Bradley Dack, Daniel Ayala nor Ben Brereton Diaz. In a side light on experience, that's a big gap to plug.
I won't be happy unless the club's recruitment department learns to complete transfer forms. We don't need another Lewis O'Brien situation.
Our key player will be Adam Wharton [above]. The younger brother of Scott broke through last season, and what a midfield talent – mobile, composed and with an AI-level field of vision.
Our most underrated player is Harry Pickering [below] – not the flashiest, but a world of consistency at left-back.
Fans think our owners are rich souls with lots of stoicism, but no common sense when it comes to running a football club. Yep, it's still the Venky's.
The opposition player I'd love here is Bristol City's Alex Scott. The odds of Rovers being able to afford him? There's more chance of me bagging a date with Alexandra Daddario...
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Norwich's Ashley Barnes. Other than his Burnley past, he never seems to get any comeuppance for his antics, which sounds petty – and is!
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Sam Gallagher. He has served his purpose, but I really don't want to sit through another season of him being two seconds behind every passage of play.
The one change I'd make would be for CEO Steve Waggott to no longer be in charge. He's out of touch with fans, season tickets are overpriced and the marketing spilling out of the club is so unimaginative my head hurts.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is generally good. Jon Dahl Tomasson's slow-burner modern style improved as the campaign rumbled on. But clubs in the Netherlands are keen and he is seen as replaceable, with a sore point being his rigid belief in Plan A when a match needs a different approach.
We'll finish 9th, having been in the top six for 45 games and 87 minutes.



FFT VERDICT 6TH

Blackburn have learned to recruit smartly for a clear style, and they are superbly coached by Jon Dahl Tomasson. If Niall Ennis settles in quickly up top and Adam Wharton has the season that natives hope he will, then that small step into the top six looks tantalizingly close.



BRISTOL CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 14th **FA CUP** Fifth Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round **TOP SCORER** Tommy Conway (12)

FAN FILE

AIDAN CONNOLLY
@AidanConnolly19

Last season was about as good as we expected. We never looked like making the play-offs, but nor was there a threat of relegation. Nice to have a semi-decent FA Cup run, too.
This season will be different because this squad has had a year to gel. With the early additions of Rob Dickie from QPR and Aberdeen's Ross McCrorie, we could do something special.
Our key player will be Alex Scott [below], the Championship's Young Player of the Season. The Guernsey Grealish's talent is largely recognised now. If he goes, how we spend the transfer money could have an impact.
Our most underrated player is Cameron Pring, and criminally so. He's one of the division's best left-backs.
Look out for 21-year-old forward Sam Bell [above], who became a regular during the second half of the season. He has explosive pace and can finish.
The opposition player I'd love here is Gustavo Hamer, a brilliant midfielder.
The active player I'd love to have back is Niclas Eliasson – the best crosser of a football I've seen at City.
The pantomime villain will be Neil Warnock, as per. It looks like he's going to be around forever. Having said that, nobody else could have kept Huddersfield up last season.
The thing my club really gets right is the pathway from academy to first team. We have so much young talent, and it's nice to see it given a chance.
The one change I'd make would be the sub-par merchandise the club have released for this term. Seriously, some of it is *awful*.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leicester, depending on who they keep hold of. West Bromwich Albion will be a lot stronger than last season, too.
The fan's opinion of our gaffer is very positive. There's optimism around the squad that Nigel Pearson is building.
If he left, he should be replaced by a manager who plays tidy football. Nobody wants to see hoof-ball. Steven Schumacher at Plymouth could be a good replacement.
We'll finish 6th, says the optimist in me – a bit like Sunderland last season – but the realist in me says 10th, which would still be progress.



FFT VERDICT 16TH

Defensive additions should strengthen City, so if Anis Mehmeti can provide fresh magic while the talented Tommy Conway builds on 2022-23's double-figure goal tally, then progress is possible – but so is stagnation if their various veterans drop off. And will Alex Scott stay?



CARDIFF CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 21st **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Sory Kaba (8)

FAN FILE

BEN JAMES
@ViewFromTheNin

Last season was awful and pretty demoralising, but I'm ready to do it all over again because we stayed up.
This season will be different because we have a new manager in former Fenerbahce boss Erol Bulut. Frankly, it couldn't be much worse than last year.
I won't be happy unless we go one season without sacking a manager and replacing him with whoever was in the room at the time.
Our key player will be up for grabs, because we've lost excellent loanees in Sory Kaba, Jaden Philogene and Cedric Kipre and were slow to sign replacements. Callum Robinson [above, left], captain Joe Ralls and Perry Ng all did well at points last year.
Our most underrated player is midfielder Ryan Wintle [below]. If you know, you know.
Look out for young Rubin Colwill's breakthrough year. He has talent but has had to contend with growth spurts, injuries and Steve Morison.
Fans think our owner is a complete football dunce (it's still Vincent Tan).
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Matt Grimes: annoyingly good and captains them lot down the road.
The active player I'd love to have back is Victor Camarasa, my Spanish king. He was great for us in 2018-19.
The pantomime villain will be chairman Mehmet Dalman when it's revealed that his 'big signing' to drive ticket sales is actually some no-mark we didn't want.
The thing my club really gets right is sacking managers.
The one change I'd make would be more football experience in the boardroom! We've been crying out for someone who just knows football.
I'm least looking forward to playing QPR away. We never do well there.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is one of excitement, but he's coming in from a different league and that dampens our expectations. The way he plays looks compatible with what we want, and he looks fiery, so we're hopeful.
If he left, he should be replaced by Vincent Tan, so he can show us his football acumen. If not, Nathan Jones.
We'll finish between 14th and 8th. That would be like winning the league.



FFT VERDICT 23RD

Sabri Lamouchi made an impact in his three months as boss, so the fact an extended deal couldn't be agreed seems ominous – instead, Erol Bulut comes into 2023-24 from a standing start. With star loanees gone and goals in short supply, another struggle is likely.



COVENTRY CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 5th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Viktor Gyokeres (22)

FAN FILE

LAURENCE KILPATRICK
@Thelonelyseason

Last season was the worst of times and then, unfathomably, the best of times. A pitch mangled to unusability by the Commonwealth Games, our star defender – Dominic Hyam – bartered for electricity coupons, the season beginning with us at the bottom of the league and with fewer points than a football... then Hyde turned back into Jekyll and we catapulted ourselves up the league like Lady Godiva on an electric scooter.
The big talking point is how we come close to recreating a logic-defying season when we're likely to sell our two best players, Gustavo Hamer and Viktor Gyokeres. Mark Robins has to recreate a squad without some pretty important furniture.
I won't be happy unless we avoid the tragic second-season narrative (yeah, I'm looking at you, Huddersfield) where the previous campaign's losing play-off finalist crashes and burns like a divorcee in a tailspin.



Our key player will be Ben Sheaf. The former Arsenal midfielder took a while to win everyone over but he's got the dreadful 'Rolls-Royce' moniker, which means he's half-decent at passing.
Fans think our owner is either walking on water or turning it into wine. Taking over mid-season from the widely reviled SISU, Doug King chaperoned us up the league and to Wembley.
The pantomime villain will be Mike Ashley [below], who bought our stadium. Whether it's a zero-hours contract or a no-fault eviction, the puppeteer of malevolence isn't here to make friends but to wreak some kind of hell on us undeserving supporters.
The thing my club really gets right is supporter engagement. The family zone before games, the matchday socials and bonhomie between fans and club continue to warm cockles.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that if we owned our stadium, there would be a stand named after him. What Sir Mark Robins has achieved is amazing. While Nathan Jones is the hottest guy at the disco, Robins attracts zero amorous glances – that suits us fine.
We'll finish a ship-shape 11th, reverting to type after being top – or bottom – two months into the season.

FFT VERDICT 10TH

Having progressed in each of Mark Robins' seasons during his second spell, Cov want to challenge again under new ownership – they signed left-back Jay Dasilva just three days after losing at Wembley. But given how they relied on key individuals, departures could set them back.



HUDDERSFIELD TOWN



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 18th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Jordan Rhodes (6)

FAN FILE

MARCUS MIDDLETON

Last season was horrendous until Neil Warnock [above] arrived, worked his magic, and we survived with ease.
The big talking point is whether Warnock can reshape his own squad and continue the top-of-the-table form he achieved at the end of last season over a longer period.
This season will be different because we have a proper manager in place, with players who have bought into his ideas. Plus, we have a guaranteed six points from Leeds to look forward to.
Our key player will be Jack Rudoni [below]. The midfielder prospered under Warnock and, if he can add goals to his game, we should show significant improvement.
Our most underrated player is Matty Pearson. The Keighley Cannavaro is adaptable, dependable, whole-hearted – and a goalscorer.
Look out for Pat Jones, a pacy 20-year-old winger who was starting to find his feet when he got injured.



The opposition player I'd love here is Jamie Vardy, even though it would be 12 years too late. Lee Clark decided against signing him when he was playing in the lower leagues.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Luke Ayling of Leeds. He looks like a Sunday morning pub player and his hair needs a good wash and cut.
Fans think our owner is going to bring his fresh thinking and American ideas (dollars) to the club after taking over in the summer. Welcome, Kevin Nagle.
The one change I'd make would be for the club to purchase one of the closed pubs near the ground and turn it into a fans' boozer with memorabilia from the club's history. Remember, we were the first club to win the top division three times in a row.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's the messiah. The fear is that he may not have the stamina for a full season – he turns 75 in December.
If he left, he should be replaced by another established manager who the players respect, rather than someone like Mark Fotheringham, who talks a good game in a job interview but is plainly out of their depth.
We'll finish 10th. Some stability would do just nicely.

FFT VERDICT 21ST

Having an impact over 15 games requires different skills to Neil Warnock's new remit of overseeing a rebuild, so retaining him is a risk. Keeper Lee Nicholls may bail out his Terriers, but winning matches with 25 to 30 per cent possession tends not to last for a full season.



HULL CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 15th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Oscar Estupinan (13)

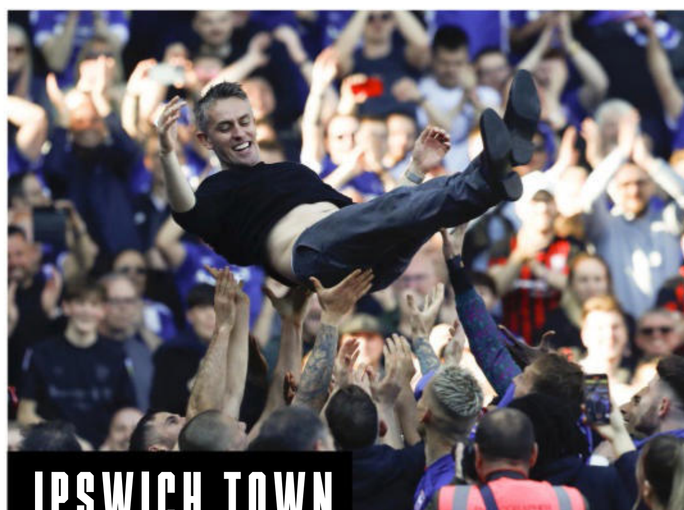
FAN FILE
RICK SKELTON

Last season was much more like it. Crowds were up after the early-2022 takeover and initial investment, then once Liam Rosenior [below] took charge, the team finished mid-table. He's an excellent coach and, having proved himself, deserves to be backed.
The big talking point is whether we can trouble the play-offs. We made tons of hit-and-miss signings last season, but now we have a way of playing that everyone understands. One or two consistent attacking threats would make a huge difference.
Our key player will be Ozan Tufan [above]. The Turkish international is our most enigmatic player since Geovanni. If he does it consistently, he'll be the best player in the league.
Our most underrated player is Alfie Jones, a terrific centre-half whose contribution is valued but often overshadowed by others around him. He has just signed a new three-year deal and could play at a higher level.
Fans think our owner is wonderful! Acun Ilicali's fan-first approach changed the mood after the Allams – we must be the only club whose atmosphere improved in lockdown!
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Luke Ayling. He scores a goal once every three years, always against us, then does that stupid duck dance.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Tobias Figueiredo. He's been a disaster since joining from Nottingham Forest, 'highlighted' by his comical howlers against Swansea.
The one change I'd make would be to make more use of the areas around the MKM Stadium on matchday, using the park for fans. And relocate the club's academy, retail and hospitality.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leeds. Their superiority in times of mediocrity being back in the second tier is no fun for anyone.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is promising. Rosenior stabilised the defence and most are happy to see what he can do with a pre-season. Our problem could be a lack of goal threat.
If he left, he should be replaced by Kieran McKenna, a great coach doing a tremendous job at Ipswich.
We'll finish 6th.



FFT VERDICT 13TH

With just six defeats in 28 from Liam Rosenior's appointment, and some of those without a striker, hopes are high on Humberside. Progress is likely, though it might be modest if last year's goalscoring troubles persist. If so, will Rosenior be given the time he deserves?



IPSWICH TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 2nd **FA CUP** Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Conor Chaplin (29)

FAN FILE
PHIL HAM
@twtduk

Last season was superb: Town's first promotion in 23 years and a terrific campaign, with a club-record 98 points and scoring 101 goals in the process. We've got the momentum, so if we can get off to a good start, we will compete with anybody, especially with one or two astute additions.
I won't be happy unless we beat Norwich. It's been a while.
Our key player will be Conor Chaplin, who netted 29 goals in all competitions last season and has signed a new contract. Another 20-plus haul would stand us in good stead.
Our most underrated player is midfielder Massimo Luongo [below], at least by Sheffield Wednesday, who let him go, and then Middlesbrough, who didn't play him. The Australian, who had been on loan at Town a decade ago, rejoined in January and played a big part in the run of 13 wins from 14 that ensured promotion. He's yet to lose a game since his return.
Fans think our owner is as good as they get. Our US owners, of whom the biggest player is Arizona's police and fire service pension fund, delivered everything they promised in two years. The Championship is only the start.
The opposition player I'd love here is Leicester striker George Hirst, who was on loan here last season. He scored a brilliant solo effort in the 3-0 win at Barnsley that all but sealed promotion.
The active players I'd love to have back are Adam Webster and Flynn Downes. It would be good to have them now we're on the up again.
The pantomime villain will be Marvin Johnson for head-butting Wes Burns during Sheffield Wednesday's visit to Portman Road. There are few greater crimes in Suffolk these days.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is tremendous. Everyone loves Kieran McKenna [above], whose song is sung more than any player. The former Manchester United first-team coach looks to be on his way to the top. Hopefully, he can take Town with him.
If he left, he should be replaced by Oxford boss Liam Manning, a former Town academy player and coach who was harshly treated by MK Dons.
We'll finish 4th or 5th.



FFT VERDICT 5TH

This is an exciting time to be an Ipswich fan. A top-half finish would be satisfactory, but if League One stars such as Conor Chaplin, Leif Davis and new signing Jack Taylor can step up as expected, Kieran McKenna's ambitious Tractor Boys could take this league by storm...



LEEDS UNITED



LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 19th **FA CUP** Fifth Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round **TOP SCORER** Rodrigo (15)

FAN FILE

DANIEL CHAPMAN
@MoscowhiteTSB

Last season was a disaster; a joke; a natural consequence of finishing 9th in the Premier League in 2020-21 and the board thinking they had it made.
This season will be different because we don't actually get relegated very often. This is just our fourth in 60 years. We don't really have a plan for it, which is worrying... but also exciting? Maybe?
Fans think our owner has to impress us. 49ers Enterprises completed their incremental takeover from Andrea Radrizzani this summer, and must work fast to get past questions about their years of silent part-ownership.
The thing my club really gets right is screwing things up.
The one change I'd make would be doing all of the ground improvements that didn't get done while we were in the Premier League.
The pantomime villain will be Neil Warnock. I half-suspect he's taken another year at Huddersfield just so he can manage them against us.



Our most underrated player is Patrick Bamford [below], in a weird way. Fans will argue he was overrated, but two years of injuries since scoring 16 goals in the Championship and 17 in the top flight, in back-to-back seasons, mean his actual abilities are all but forgotten. There's mojo to rediscover.
Look out for midfielder Archie Gray. The 17-year-old heir to the Gray family dynasty could thrive in the second tier.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Weston McKennie – he has gone, but just to make sure. His loan from Juventus was a disaster on the pitch and a dalliance with the worst of modern football fans online.
The opposition player I'd love here is Leeds-born Erling Haaland. He has already completed football, but what about on a cold Tuesday night etc. etc.
The active player I'd love to have back is James Milner. Full stop.
I'm least looking forward to playing Sheffield Wednesday. It'll be like a post-relegation walk of shame.
I won't be happy unless I start supporting a different club. But after Jesse Marsch's Red Bull kick-and-rush, I'd just like to see some Leeds players passing to each other.
We'll finish 7th, inevitably.

FFT VERDICT — 7TH

As the takeover dragged on, player turnover happened later than was optimal, and there's no shortage of players at Leeds eyeing up a move to preserve an international career. Bouncing straight back up is a tall order during edgy times at Elland Road, even with talent in the side.



LEICESTER CITY



LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 18th **FA CUP** Fifth Round
LEAGUE CUP Quarter-Final **TOP SCORER** Harvey Barnes (13)

FAN FILE

DAVID BEVAN
@TheFosseWay

The big talking point is the massive rebuilding job after relegation and how we reclaim our identity. We want a club we can get behind again.
This season will be different because we'll presumably win more than nine league games. For a start, we have eight more fixtures to do it in.
I won't be happy unless we get promoted, essentially.
Our key player will be Harry Souttar [above], a giant who should prove invaluable in the Championship. He lost his place at the end of the season but the Australian should thrive here.
Look out for Will Alves, an extremely skilful 18-year-old attacker who is aiming to bounce back from a torn cruciate ligament, sustained due to a horror tackle in a youth-team game against Wolves last year.
Fans think our owner is not quite as untouchable as he was, for many, having taken his eye off the ball. He has a point to prove again.



The opposition player I'd love here is Gustavo Hamer. The Coventry midfielder seems to have taken the Championship by storm.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Harry Kane, who scores every time he plays us. At least we won't have to worry about that this year.
The pantomime villain will be referees, seeing as they won't have the get-out of VAR. This will take some getting used to.
The thing my club really gets right is its community work, which makes a real difference to a lot of people.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is... can I use a minibus?
The active player I'd love to have back is Riyad Mahrez. You've won it all, Riyad – now come back to where it all began, in the second tier.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is optimistic. This is a time for a new era at Leicester City and Enzo Maresca [below] feels like the right man for the long-awaited reset. Pep Guardiola's former Manchester City assistant is a genuinely exciting appointment.
If he left, he should be replaced by Nigel Pearson. If Maresca doesn't work out then it's time to give Nige a call.
We'll finish 1st. Let's do this.

FFT VERDICT — 1ST

Even after releasing for free players who'd cost them a total of £100m to buy, Leicester's squad is packed with quality. Others will follow Youri Tielemans out of the door but they are recruiting ambitiously, and if Enzo Maresca has learnt anything from Pep Guardiola, glory awaits.



MIDDLESBROUGH



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 4th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Chuba Akpom (29)

FAN FILE
JOSH HOLLIS
@joshhollis

Last season was brilliant, even if it finally ended with a whimper. Turning a season that was going nowhere into one of the most exciting in recent memory was alien to most Boro fans!
This season will be different because expectations will be on us to be up there challenging again from the start.
The big talking point is can we hold on to Chuba Akpom and get Cameron Archer back on loan from Aston Villa?
Our most underrated player is Riley McGree [below], a lovely technical player who we really miss between the lines when he isn't playing.
Look out for 20-year-old striker Josh Coburn, back from a pretty successful loan at Bristol Rovers and pushing for a more prominent role this season.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Jed Wallace. He always plays well against us.
The thing my club really gets right is recruitment. Say it quietly, but it's been good for a couple of windows now.



Fans think our owner is still one of the best around. You'll always hear some grumbles, but Steve Gibson is a true Teessider who continues to pour money into the club.
The one change I'd make would be more attractive ticket prices. Season tickets and walk-ups remain among the highest in the division, despite Teesside being a low-income area.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is forward Matthew Hoppe. I'm not sure what he does, other than change his hair colour a lot.
The pantomime villain will be Neil Warnock, back for another run at Huddersfield. Hopefully, it'll be the booing send-off he has always craved. More likely is our inevitable 1-0 defeat.
I won't be happy unless we have another 20-goal season from a striker in the league, after not having one since Bernie Slaven in 1989-90.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Michael Carrick is magic; he's changed the club's whole vibe, with attractive football and great man-management. We hope he can keep it going.
If he left, he should be replaced by Tony Mowbray. Bring him home, but give him a decent budget this time.
We'll finish 2nd.

FFT VERDICT 2ND

If taking Boro from 21st to 4th with an attractive style, while nurturing the young Hayden Hackney, gives Michael Carrick hubris after his first six months as a manager, he can remind himself that they leaked 35 goals in 30 games. Fix that, replace key loanees, and promotion is his.



MILLWALL



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 8th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Tom Bradshaw (17)

FAN FILE
MERV PAYNE
@mervpayne

Last season was bizarre. We looked nailed on to make the play-offs, but managed to lose 4-3 from being 3-1 up at half-time on the last day at home to Blackburn. Throwing it away like that left fans in a state of disbelief.
This season will be different because three big clubs coming down and two coming up means there'll be plenty of teams with money to spend. With the 2024-25 TV deal, League One sides will receive around half of the money that the Championship teams will, so it is crucial we stay exactly where we are.
I won't be happy unless we play more positively. Gary Rowett's tactics are... 'pragmatic', but it's hard to criticise as those tactics have Millwall challenging for promotion each year. Still, a higher tempo would win over fans a bit more.
Our key player will be Kevin Nisbet [below] – signing the striker from Hibs might signal a switch to playing two up front and could provide the extra 10 to 15 goals that we've been lacking.



The opposition player I'd love here is Josh Bowler. The nippy winger was back on loan at Blackpool last season, and I'd have him down at The Den. If he can bring Chris Wood with him from Nottingham Forest, even better.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Norwich's Josh Sargent. I've developed an irrational dislike. He had a blinder against us at their place last season and he winds me up generally.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is goalkeeper George Long. I don't know how he's No.1 ahead of Bart Bialkowski. The defence looks nervous in front of him and in the final two matches, he was beaten by two soft long-range efforts.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is split, Brexit-like. Some want him out, while others point to four successive top-half finishes on a small budget. But Luton spoiled that argument!
If he left, he should be replaced by a young coach like Ipswich's Kieran McKenna. People say Nathan Jones, but he's only really done it at one club.
We'll finish 15th. It's going to be the most competitive Championship in decades, so I'll be a misery guts and take a year off challenging for the play-offs. I hope I'm proved wrong.

FFT VERDICT 9TH

Having shipped only 178 goals in 171 games under Gary Rowett's leadership, the Lions should be reliable at the back again. Play-off hopes rest on whether star signing Zian Flemming can deliver on that difficult second album – and if Millwall can keep him to find out.



NORWICH CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 13th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Josh Sargent (13)

FAN FILE

NICK HAYHOE
@nick_ncfc

Last season was an existential crisis.
The big talking point is that we're at a crossroads. Teemu Pukki's exit has signalled the end of a cycle, and no one knows what's best for us next.
Our most underrated player is the world's best centre-half: Grant Hanley [below]. He's made in Scotland from girders. Sure, he'll underhit the odd backpass, but it wouldn't be us if that didn't happen each week. We need him fit from a ruptured Achilles soon.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Josh Sargent. He went to the World Cup with the USA and then forgot how to kick a football, which he wasn't the best at doing in the first place.
The active player I'd love to have back is Emi Buendia. We gave up any notion of wanting to be a proper top-flight club when we flogged him to Aston Villa after promotion in 2020-21.
I'm least looking forward to playing Ipswich – not because they're on the up and could finally break our 14-year unbeaten streak, but because it always gives me a stomach ache just thinking about playing them.
The thing my club really gets right is boring stuff like having good training facilities. We've even got an organic vegetable patch. You'll never sing that.
The one change I'd make would be for our women's team to keep playing at Carrow Road. In April, more than 7,000 fans turned up for their first ever match there, and it was ace.
The opposition player I'd love here is the 40-year-old Fabio Quagliarella. It's exactly 10 years since Juventus reportedly turned down £9m from us. We got Ricky van Wolfswinkel instead.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that David Wagner [above] is avoiding a lot of flak that is instead being aimed at sporting director Stuart Webber. Wagner made a decent start, culminating in a great win at Millwall in February – then we fell apart and missed the play-offs by miles.
If he left, he should be replaced by ChatGPT. We already have a football simulator called SoccerBot360 at our training ground, so we may as well go the whole hog. It'd be cheaper.
We'll finish 7th.



FFT VERDICT 12TH

The Canaries look mentally drained and need an overhaul, yet the kind required isn't feasible after a slump to 13th. At least new/old faces Ashley Barnes and Shane Duffy will bring experience, while Jack Stacey is a neat pick-up and Gabriel Sara will provide individual quality again.



PLYMOUTH ARGYLE



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE Winners **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Ryan Hardie (17)

FAN FILE

RYAN DABBS
@ryandabbs_

Last season was unbelievable, as we won League One with 101 points after being written off all season. After 13 long years away in which we almost went bust, Argyle are back at this level.
This season will be different because we aren't expected to win every week. The squad needs a lot of work.
I won't be happy unless we give it a proper go. I want to celebrate goals at as many grounds as possible.
Our key player will be Adam Randell [below]. The 22-year-old came through our academy, dictates the play from midfield consistently, and is slowly but surely becoming a leader.
Our most underrated player is Dan Scarr. An old-fashioned centre-back, he's willing to stick his head in where it hurts. He can play a bit, too.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Tyreik Wright. He has only been here for six months, but the winger seemed out of his depth and our 3-4-2-1 system didn't suit him.
Fans think our owner is incredible. Everything is transparent, everything is sustainable, and Simon Hallett clearly loves the club. He's invested in making the club better in every aspect.
Look out for Freddie Issaka. Once the youngest player in our history, making his debut at 15, he's 17 now and has been banging them in at youth level.
The active player I'd love to have back is Norwich's Bali Mumba. They say don't fall in love with loanees, but that was impossible after his displays.
The pantomime villain will be Ryan Lowe. Leaving Plymouth for Preston in December 2021 was fair enough – but doing so without thanking a single person at the club left a sour taste.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that there's no one better. In his first full season as a boss, Steven Schumacher helped us to reach the EFL Trophy final and win the league. His substitutions are spot on and he has united the club.
If he left, he should be replaced by John Eustace. He'd fit right in at Home Park with an attacking style of play that he hasn't quite managed to get right at Birmingham yet.
I'm most looking forward to playing Leeds and Leicester at Home Park.
We'll finish 21st, enjoying every game.



FFT VERDICT 20TH

Survival is more than achievable. The long-term injury to star keeper Michael Cooper won't help early on (except in temporarily putting off suitors), but Argyle have a talented manager and they recruit superbly: defender Julio Pleguezuelo is an astonishing coup from FC Twente.



PRESTON NORTH END



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 12th **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Ched Evans (9)

FAN FILE

OLLY DAWES
@DeepdaleDigest

Last season was up and down. Five 0-0s in our first six games, sitting in the top six at Christmas, fearing a slump in February and dreaming of play-offs in April. Mid-table was fair in the end.
The big talking point is our overall direction. There's a belief that PNE are plodding along while Coventry, Millwall and Luton go past us.
I won't be happy unless we start showing a real long-term plan. Loanees and one-year deals are uninspiring.
Our key player will be keeper Freddie Woodman [below], if he stays. He was last season's top performer.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Ben Woodburn. He made next to no impact last term and has now activated another year on his contract, much to fans' frustrations.
Our most underrated player is Brad Potts. Switching to right wing-back has completely turned around his career.
Look out for Felipe Rodriguez-Gentile. Linked with the Premier League elite, our 16-year-old Brazilian has been prolific in the youth setup.
Fans think our owner is doing quite a decent job in difficult circumstances. New investment is certainly needed, but the support from Craig Hemmings after the passing of his father Trevor in December 2021 is appreciated.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Blackburn's Sammie Szmodics. His outrageous dive at Deepdale last season was more than enough for this.
The active player I'd love to have back is Ben Davies. He seems to have stalled since leaving us and would be ideal in Ryan Lowe's back three.
The thing my club really gets right is honouring its history: stands named after legendary Preston players, the Sir Tom Finney statue and everything that comes with Gentry Day, remembering departed supporters from the last year.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is divided. Lowe's claims of an attacking 'brand' of football hasn't yet been seen, but he has done pretty well with relatively limited resources.
If he left, he should be replaced by John Herdman. It's a bit of a leftfield shout, but who didn't fall in love with Canada at the 2022 World Cup?
We'll finish in mid-table again – 14th.



FFT VERDICT 17TH

Preston have only known top-half form since Ryan Lowe came in, but that could change if they don't find goals and a more sustainable plan – since 2020, they've made as many loan signings as permanent ones. Liverpool right-back Calvin Ramsay is a good borrow, mind...



QUEENS PARK RANGERS



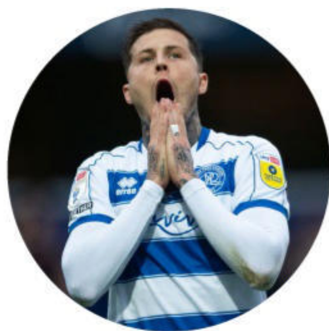
LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 20th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Lyndon Dykes (8)

FAN FILE

CLIVE WHITTINGHAM
@LoftforWords

Last season was great, yeah. We were top of the league in late October and then the Premier League came for our manager. "I can't be the first person to run away from the ship," said Mick Beale. Then, after he'd been the first to run away from the ship (to Rangers in the end), we won two of 28 games. We could – probably should – have been relegated, but then we won away at the best team in the league, landed on our wheels, pulled over and said, "What were you worried about?"
The big talking point is pulling the Gareth Ainsworth nostalgia lever. The football has been bracing; do we really want to continue with that? Director of football Les Ferdinand resigned as they are poles apart on the type of signings Ainsworth wants, so it seems we do.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is alarm. We scrambled two wins, both with 20 per cent possession. At Burnley a central midfielder attempted one pass in 67 minutes, completing zero. Ainsworth is loved as an ex-player and respected for his work at Wycombe, but there's a lot of apprehension now.
Our key player will be Ilias Chair – if he's here. Players may need to be sold to bridge an FFP gap caused by our overspend in 2021-22. In that climate, Lyndon Dykes [below] inking a new contract was a pleasant surprise.
Fans think our owners are benevolent but poor at the job. We lose £2m per month, per the last accounts, and their decision-making is all over the place, but they pay for everything and just spent £20m on a new training ground that was desperately needed. We're kept alive by their benevolence but killed by their incompetence.
The thing my club really gets right is their promotional video for season tickets – with the prices raised. After a record 12 home defeats, five goals at the Loft End all season and one win in our last 15 games at Loftus Road, the tagline was, 'Routines never change'. Essentially: "Well, what else are you going to do on a Saturday?" Nailed it.
We'll finish with Ajax Youth Bot 3.6 trying to explain 4-box-2 formations to Josh Scowen, after Ainsworth is sacked in October amid poor results and a hail of criticism about the style.



FFT VERDICT 24TH

QPR's grim return from the final 30 games of last season would equate to a meagre 31 points over a full campaign, and things didn't really improve under Gareth Ainsworth. With a squad ill-suited to his style, does his skillset extend far enough beyond motivation?



ROTHERHAM UNITED



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 19th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Chiedozie Ogbene (9)

FAN FILE

LUKE HOWDLE
@LukeHowdle

Last season was fantastic, achieving Championship safety without spending a day in the bottom three all season. Not bad for relegation favourites.
The big talking point is transfers and who we can keep, with some of last season's loanees now out of contract. Defenders Sean Morrison, Lee Peltier and Tyler Blackett have chosen to renew their deals, but unfortunately the writing was on the wall with Chieo Ogbene and he's gone to Luton.
Our key player will be Jordan Hugill [above]. Teams need a striker who gets the division and we finally have one. His link-up play is vital.
Our most underrated player is goalkeeper Viktor Johansson [below] – how he didn't make the Championship Team of the Season, I'll never know. Cam Humphries also impressed at the back, despite having lots of partners.
Fans think our owner is great! We're one of the country's best-run clubs, don't lose money and have very little debt. The biggest gripe has always been spending a little more to secure our place in the second tier, but that appears to be happening this year.
The active player I'd love to have back is Dan Barlaser – we sold him to Middlesbrough in January and brought in seven players. His creativity would have taken us to mid-table.
The pantomime villain will be Tom Eaves. He signed a three-year contract on big wages, promised us 20 goals, and I'm not sure he even got that in appearances. Maybe he's this year's Chuba Akpom...?
I'm least looking forward to playing whichever teams want to be entitled, whinging at the officials and expecting favourable treatment. When you play Rotherham, you should know that we will be committed and full-blooded, and teams need to step up and fight.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that we love him. Bringing in Matt Taylor after we lost Paul Warne to Derby may have been a blessing in disguise – he changed our formation and tactics with great success. I'm really looking forward to seeing him put together his own team. He's not afraid to tell the chairman what's needed.
We'll finish higher than last year. 16th.



FFT VERDICT 22ND

Strong January recruitment saved the Millers – in December they'd been horrendous – and they'll have to deliver that standard again, now that key men have departed. With Chiedozie Ogbene's quality gone, even Matt Taylor's straight-talking leadership may not be enough.



SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 3rd **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Third Round **TOP SCORER** Michael Smith (21)

FAN FILE

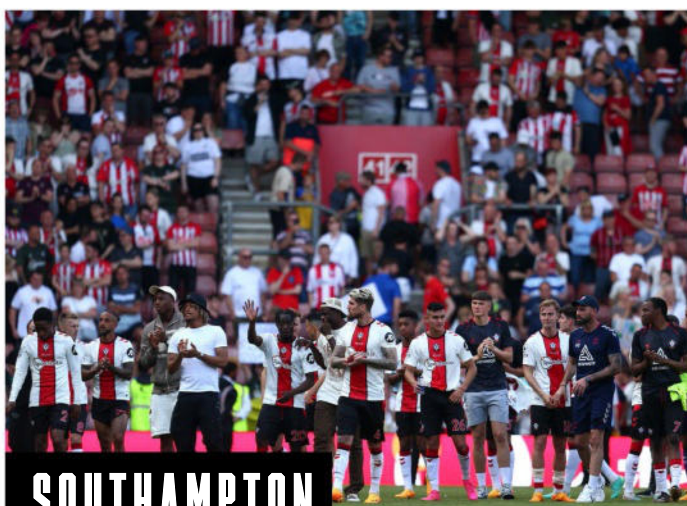
LAURA LAWRENCE
@YICETOR

Last season was bonkers. And that was just the play-offs. The comeback of all comebacks saw off Peterborough, then Josh Windass' last-gasp winner at Wembley sunk Barnsley in the final.
This season will be different because we clawed our way out of the toughest League One I've ever known... and into the toughest Championship line-up that there has ever been.
The big talking point is Darren Moore's inexplicable departure. We wouldn't have dragged ourselves through those play-offs without him. The new boss has got to understand a dressing room that would have done anything for the previous manager.
I won't be happy unless we're able to consolidate, replenish the squad and stay the f**k up.
Our most underrated player is Liam Palmer [below]. He played more minutes than anyone else last season and is now in the club's all-time top 15 appearance makers.
Our key player will be midfielder George Byers, if we keep him and if he's fit. We proved last season that we could do without Barry Bannan and win. Our form dipped when Byers was ruled out for the season.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Tyreeq Bakinson, though I would feel bad about doing it. He just didn't cut it last season.
Fans think our owner is complicated. Dejphon Chansiri gets mixed reviews.
The one change I'd make would be the commercial side of the business. Our ticket prices are extortionate and our shop is woeful.
The pantomime villain will be our old nemesis, Neil Warnock. The old bugger just won't retire. Colin did wonders with Huddersfield last season and our win rate against his teams is pants.
The thing my club really gets right is the dressing room mentality. Will it still be the same post-Moore?
The active player I'd love to have back is Jamie Vardy. It would be quite the party to have the Wednesday fan back at the club he started with.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leeds, Leeds, Leeds.
We'll finish 17th. I'll be happy for us to be average and build sensibly.



FFT VERDICT 19TH

Following an astonishing play-off turnaround to win promotion, the wind has gone out of Wednesday's sails with the shock departure of popular gaffer Darren Moore. But if Barry Bannan can still boss games at this level, then they should keep the drop zone at arm's length.



SOUTHAMPTON



LAST SEASON

PREMIER LEAGUE 20th **FA CUP** Fifth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Semi-Final **TOP SCORER** James Ward-Prowse (11)

FAN FILE
JAKE HUGHES
@JJHughes_

Last season was a horror show from start to end. Relegation was deserved.
The big talking point is the mistakes made by our rich but incompetent owners, Sport Republic, from replacing experienced players with untested youth, to hiring Nathan Jones. The fanbase is under no illusions about the Championship – we were relegated to League One not that long ago, remember – but this situation does force us into a long-overdue rebuild.
Our key player will be Charly Alcaraz, if he stays. As one of last season's few good signings, he brings much-needed forward thinking to the midfield.
Look out for Samuel Edozie [below]. The 20-year-old winger should get more minutes and flourish.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Hull's Lewie Coyle. It's nothing he's done – blame *Football Manager*.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leicester. That fixture always fills me with dread due to a certain scoreline.
The opposition player I'd love here is Viktor Gyokeres. It's been a long time since Saints have had a dangerous striker leading the line.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Adam Armstrong. He has a good goalscoring record in the Championship, but looks bereft of confidence and ability in a Saints shirt. It would be a miracle if we recouped anything close to the £15m we paid.
The thing my club really gets right is the youth setup. There had been a lull, but we're starting to see the academy bear fruit again with talents such as Tyler Dibling, Dom Ballard and Kamari Doyle getting Premier League minutes.
The active player I'd love to have back is Virgil van Dijk, to fix the leaky defence. Sadio Mané would also be welcomed back with open arms.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is quietly optimistic, with the odd underwhelmed groan. Russell Martin likes to play positive, passing football and we'd like to see it.
I won't be happy unless we finally see a Southampton team to get behind. It'd be nice to have a clear style of play and some wins at home – we only saw two of those last season.
We'll finish an oddly optimistic 2nd.



FFT VERDICT 3RD

Russell Martin wants his Saints side to model his keep-ball outfits at MK Dons and Swansea, but with greater efficiency in both boxes. He has the coaching nous and quality to deliver, and technical ability in the squad here, but he hasn't won promotion as a manager – yet...



STOKE CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 16th **FA CUP** Fifth Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Jacob Brown, Tyrese Campbell (9)

FAN FILE
ROB DOOLAN
@rob_doolan

The big talking point is The Great Rebuild. All but about half a dozen first-teamers have left and we basically need to sign a new squad, but we are finally able to spend a bit after years of FFP woes. Some excitement would be nice – we haven't finished higher than 14th since returning here in 2018.
I won't be happy unless we at last start getting player recruitment right. It's been abysmal for far too long.
Our most underrated player is Jordan Thompson [below], generally a steady presence in midfield.
Look out for Connor Taylor. It might be now or never for the promising 21-year-old centre-back, who's still in need of a bit of seasoning.
Fans think our owner is 10 to 15 years behind the times. There's no doubt the Coates family love the club, but their lack of vision is what has put us in the doldrums and kept us there.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Brandon Thomas-Asante at West Brom. His dangerous mid-air foul broke the back of our player of the year, Ben Wilmot. Literally.
The active player I'd love to have back is Xherdan Shaqiri. Did we really have players like him a few years ago?
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Dwight Gayle. Signed on a big wage years past his prime, he was a nail in Michael O'Neill's coffin.
The pantomime villain will be Sam Clucas, who will no doubt turn up at his new club and have a blinder against us. And let us know about it.
The thing my club really gets right is free coach travel to away games and a price freeze on season tickets for a 16th consecutive year.
The one change I'd make would be to establish some kind of overarching ethos above the manager, rather than letting them dictate every aspect.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Alex Neil hasn't impressed many so far. Beyond a brief spell in March where everything clicked, we really haven't improved under him. A bad start to the season and the Boothen End won't be slow in raising a few polite queries...
If he left, he should be replaced by Carlos Corberan.
We'll finish 9th.



FFT VERDICT 15TH

This looks like a(nother) rebuilding season for the Potters, who have had change in every department bar the manager. Beginning their preparations with a wafer-thin squad, a challenging start is likely, but things will pick up if teenage prodigy Emre Tezgel catches fire.



SUNDERLAND



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 6th **FA CUP** Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Amad Diallo (14)

FAN FILE

MALCOLM DUGDALE
@DugdaleMalc

Last season was an incredible achievement. If we'd had a fit striker and better centre-backs, we would have gone up – but nevertheless it's a stupendous turnaround which has put smiles on faces.
This season will be different because we cannot possibly have as bad an injury record. At times our injured XI was as good as the fit lads.
Our most underrated player is Trai Hume. Capped for Northern Ireland, the 21-year-old grabbed his chance and is now undroppable at the back. He's another cracking find by our club recruitment and data teams.
Look out for new boy Jobe Bellingham [above], 17, who fits our newfound model and strategy like a glass slipper on Cinderella. Perfect.
Fans think our owner is showing that he has a long-term strategy and plan – one that is starting to pay dividends. Kyril Louis-Dreyfus is shaping up to really make a difference for our future.



The pantomime villain will be our sporting director, Kristjaan Speakman, if he fails to tie down frontman Ross Stewart to a new deal. Compound that by not improving the squad and things could get sticky, despite him having credit in the bank.
The thing my club really gets right is moving away from recruiting over-the-hill wage-chasers and investing in youth to improve. It's like chalk and cheese from the recent past.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leeds. The gap between the Premier League and even the Championship's top six is still vast, and I don't want us to lose confidence with our approach through playing teams who will likely be very strong.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is pretty good. Tony Mowbray [below] loves a biscuit and a bag of Revels – YouTube it – as much as he likes developing young talent and letting them express themselves. He's been a cracking appointment.
If he left, he should be replaced by somebody unknown to the masses, like many of our players. If the data model for potential new coaches is as good as that for players, we'll do well.
We'll finish in the top six.

FFT VERDICT 4TH

Sunderland shone in their first season back, making the play-offs despite absentees up top and in defence, demonstrating that this young squad is tough as well as talented. Keep everyone fit – Ross Stewart especially – and they could be a force to be reckoned with.



SWANSEA CITY



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 10th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Joel Piroe (20)

FAN FILE

STEVEN CARROLL
@StevenSOS1987

Last season was extreme in its peaks and troughs: we had a rubbish start, followed by a great run, then an awful spell and eventually a brilliant one to finish things off. Hopefully we can be more consistent under our new boss, Michael Duff [above], after Russell Martin decided to leave South Wales for Southampton this summer.
This season will be different because the standard of the league looks to be far higher. If we leave our squad short of players, it'll cost us this time.
The big talking point is if things will be different now that we have a new chairman and new investors.
I won't be happy unless [co-owner] Jason Levien leaves – his interference continually holds us back.
Our key player will be midfielder Matt Grimes [below], one of Swansea's best and most consistent performers.
Look out for forward Iwan Morgan. The 17-year-old is rated highly for his performances in the under-18s.



The player I'd happily drive to another club is goalkeeper Andy Fisher, who manages to drop a clanger every other week.
The active player I'd love to have back is Oli McBurnie, although I can't see it now he's back in the top flight with Sheffield United.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leeds at Elland Road. I was looking forward to it, but it's been scheduled for a Wednesday night in November, thereby ruining one of the highlights of the season for me.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Andy Carroll, who always scores against us. Thankfully, Reading were relegated to League One.
The thing my club really gets right is its social media content – it's superb.
Fans think our owner is useless, but we hope that can change now that new people have come on board.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Duff needs to be given a chance. Time will tell. He's had a successful career to date with both Cheltenham and Barnsley, so I'm hopeful it'll work out.
If he left, he should be replaced by a manager who wants his team to play attractive football.
We'll finish 14th.

FFT VERDICT 14TH

Michael Duff and Paul Watson are outstanding appointments as head coach and sporting director respectively, but recent spending has been minimal, while doubts over the futures of key players don't make it any easier to replicate 2022-23's top 10 finish.



WATFORD



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 11th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Joao Pedro (11)

FAN FILE

MIKE PARKIN
@RookeryMike

Last season was a grave – if hardly surprising – disappointment. Another clutch of head coaches were unable to get a tune from an increasingly disinterested squad of (supposedly) talented players. There's very little to suggest that owner Gino Pozzo is about to change his approach, so if boss Valerien Ismael is struggling after 10 games, we all know the outcome. The only positive is that we know with certainty he can't leave us and then immediately guide Luton to promotion.
The big talking point is September's removal of gaffer Rob Edwards and his subsequent success at our friends up the M1. We're used to head coaches coming and going with alarming frequency, but this one hit different.
I won't be happy unless Watford manage to field an XI that at least looks like it wants to be there and has a vague idea of how they're going to win the occasional match. There was very little evidence of that last season.



Our key player will be Imran Louza [below]. Ravaged by injury last term, the mercurial midfielder provides the creativity we lacked so often.
Our most underrated player is Ken Sema – understated but committed, tough and surprisingly tricky.
Look out for forward Yaser Asprilla [above right]. He shone for Colombia at this year's Under-20 World Cup and seems poised to make a big impact.
The active player I'd love to have back is Jadon Sancho, whose career needs restarting – though just thinking back at some of the talent we've had in recent years is ruining my summer.
The pantomime villain will be Pozzo. Our owner still has credit in the bank over a decade, but serious questions are being asked about his approach.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leeds. Yes, we're well aware you sold out your allocation. Congratulations.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is yet to be formed. There is a concern that, as with previous bosses, players won't be signed to meet his style, but Ismael has the fans' support – and sympathy.
If he left, he should be replaced by... what do you mean 'if'? But your guess is as good as anyone's in that regard.
We'll finish 11th.

FFT VERDICT 11TH

To implement his direct, extreme high-pressing methods, without the advantage he had at Barnsley of inheriting a group who'd already worked towards that style, Valerien Ismael needs time. West Brom allowed him all of six months. How long will he be given at Watford...?



WEST BROMWICH ALBION



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 9th **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Brandon Thomas-Asante (9)

FAN FILE

CHRIS LEPKOWSKI
@chrislepkowski

Last season was like a wild Tripadvisor review of a three-course meal: cod liver soup for starters, a glorious Michelin-starred main course, and cold custard for a disappointing finale.
The big talking point is who actually owns us. The Chinese state's influence was first revealed two years ago, with further evidence pointing to more than 1,000 different entities being involved in one form or another.
This season will be different because Carlos Corberan [above] can improve footballers – a world away from Steve Bruce, who began last term not aware that you could make five substitutions.
Look out for Caleb Taylor [below], son of former Birmingham defender Martin. He enjoyed a successful loan spell at Cheltenham, with progression into Albion's first team looming.
Fans think our owner is Lai Guochuan. There is strong evidence to suggest he is one of many involved, but not even the authorities seem to know – or care.



The active player I'd love to have back is Romelu Lukaku, who looks a shadow of the teenager who scored 17 top-flight goals for us 11 years ago.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is keeper David Button – not because I dislike him, but because no one deserves abuse for falling short.
The pantomime villain will be Forest Green for having the temerity to claim they now have the Football League's highest stadium above sea level. Just when it seemed as though things couldn't get any worse for us.
The thing my club really gets right is never failing to disappoint in the cup competitions. It's been 53 years and counting since our last final...
I'm least looking forward to playing Birmingham. No offence to our friends from Small Heath, but it underlines that Wolves and Aston Villa are no longer our local rivals.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Corberan is hugely popular – he's our most important asset.
If he left, he should be replaced by Tony Mowbray, if our now-traditional mid-campaign vacancy coincides with his availability. But I wouldn't wish our mess of a club on anyone.
We'll finish 10th.

FFT VERDICT 8TH

Amid off-field instability, the key to success will be Carlos Corberan, who oversaw nine wins in 10 upon his arrival before injuries set things back. Unusually for the Baggies, a play-off place appears to be the best hope – and depending on their finances, even that may be tricky...

LEAGUE ONE

No division has been tougher than this one in recent times – the likes of Ipswich, Sheffield Wednesday and Sunderland all needed years to get out of it. Now they've gone, will it be any easier? Don't bet on it...

/ 2023-24

In recent years, League One has become the EFL's ultimate test of character. Plymouth Argyle missed out on the play-offs with as many as 80 points in 2021-22, but bounced back emphatically to win the title last term, combining with Ipswich to deny Sheffield Wednesday a top-two berth, even though the Owls finished on 96. Brutal.

Instead of going up comfortably, the Owls had to overturn the biggest first-leg deficit in play-off semi-final history, before Josh Windass' 123rd-minute winner at Wembley completed the mission.

It shows the path to the Championship is gruelling and unforgiving – so who can stay the course?

Having gone very close last year, Bolton look as well equipped as any: the Trotters made early signals of their intent to spend this summer, to add to an already healthy squad, and they've retained manager Ian Evatt, who only knows success.







No such luck for Barnsley, who lost gaffer Michael Duff, but if they keep squad turnover to a minimum, they can challenge after play-off final heartbreak.

Also beaten in last term's coda were Peterborough, for whom Darren Ferguson stays on, targeting an astonishing fifth promotion with one club. The Posh, though, have lost star midfielder Jack Taylor to Ipswich, plus reliable right-sider Joe Ward to Derby – the Rams missed out on the top six last season, but can prepare more smoothly this time around, without the takeover uncertainty of 12 months ago.

Portsmouth have one of the EFL's top sporting directors in Richard Hughes. He'll hope boss John Mousinho can repay a show of faith to poach the rookie from his role as player-coach at Oxford in January. The Yellows, themselves, have a revamped recruitment strategy, and with the exciting addition of Ruben Rodrigues should improve drastically on last season's disappointing 19th-place finish.

Expectations are more guarded for two of the teams coming down, as Wigan and Reading require huge rebuilds. Blackpool have more hope after reappointing their 2020-21 promotion-winning boss, Neil Critchley.

Coming up are Leyton Orient, where Richie Wellens won his second League Two title. Following the O's are Steve Evans' solid Stevenage, along with Carlisle and Northampton, where respective bosses Paul Simpson and Jon Brady guided their sides up through chronic injury crises. Those three could be in the dogfight with Cambridge, who needed five wins from

WHO WILL WIN THE LEAGUE?



DERBY



BOLTON



BARNSLEY



READING



PORTSMOUTH



PETERBOROUGH

FourFourTwo PREDICTION

1 Bolton
2 Derby
3 Barnsley
4 Portsmouth
5 Blackpool
6 Peterborough
7 Oxford
8 Charlton
9 Lincoln
10 Wycombe
11 Reading
12 Bristol Rovers
13 Wigan
14 Exeter
15 Burton
16 Leyton Orient
17 Fleetwood
18 Shrewsbury
19 Stevenage
20 Northampton
21 Port Vale
22 Cheltenham
23 Cambridge
24 Carlisle



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#FFTPREVIEW

the final nine games to stay up last season, so club legend Mark Bonner must get this rebuild right.

It's been a turbulent summer for Fleetwood and a turbulent decade for Charlton, where boss Dean Holden needs the space to do the job, after last term's 10th-placed finish. Burton and Cheltenham were delighted with lower mid-table outcomes, as were newly promoted Exeter and Bristol Rovers: with key men departing all four, more savvy recruitment is essential to avoiding a season in the mire.

If they need inspiration, look no further than Lincoln and Shrewsbury, now established in League One. Yet the Shrews' fate this campaign will depend on how former Walsall manager Matt Taylor replaces Steve Cotterill at New Meadow.

It could be a tough year for Port Vale, who may rue last season's call to part company with the revered Darrell Clarke. Another club legend was replaced at Wycombe – Gareth Ainsworth left in February – so it's down to Matt Bloomfield to write the next chapter at Adams Park. Could it be as thrilling as the last?

Bloomfield and his counterparts know that League One can be relentlessly unforgiving, but while Argyle and Wednesday were hard done by at times, both now have their prize, and therein lies the lesson. This season's third tier might not be as fearsome, but it is almost designed to knock clubs and coaches off course. Those who stay measured throughout this test of character will eventually get their A*.

Gabriel Sutton

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

01 Which club recorded the joint-best League One win last season, 6-0 against Shrewsbury, and suffered the joint-worst loss, 6-0 against Ipswich?

02 Which African country does Reading captain Andy Yiadom (below) represent internationally: Ghana, Senegal or Ivory Coast?



03 Which is the most easterly club in the league this season?

04 Which League One club are nicknamed 'The Grecians'?

05 Which is the smallest stadium currently in the third tier?

06 Which Spice Girl filed a counter-claim with the UK Patent Office against Peterborough United?

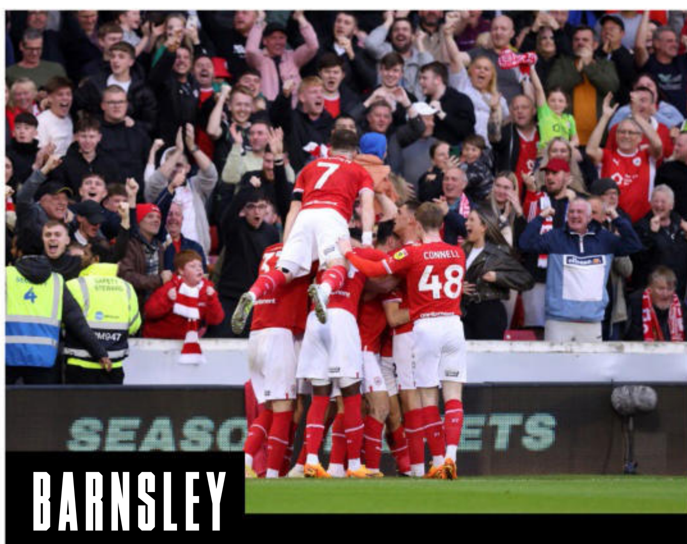
07 Who was the only player to score two League One hat-tricks last season?

08 Wigan start the season on minus eight points: they are the only relegated top-flight team to do what in the same season?

09 Oxford suffered last term's longest winless run, failing to win how many games in a row?

10 Which fictional club did Gillingham 'beat' 2-0 in a 2004 TV episode: AFC Richmond, Earls Park or Harchester United?

1. Charlton Athletic **2.** Ghana **3.** Cambridge United **4.** Exeter City **5.** Highbury Stadium (Fleetwood Town) **6.** Victoria Beckham (Posh Spice) **7.** David McGoldrick **8.** Win the FA Cup **9.** 17 **10.** Harchester United



BARNSLEY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 4th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)** Devante Cole (16)

FAN FILE

CARLO VAN DE WATERING
@RedsReport_

Last season was a very memorable one. The appointment of Michael Duff, combined with some welcomed board changes, resulted in a style of football that was excellent to watch, got us to Wembley and brought the club and fans closer together.
The big talking point is that terrific season resulting in Swansea paying the release fee to take Duff to Wales.
This season will be different because we'll have yet another manager. The last head coach to be in charge for two full campaigns at Barnsley was Simon Davey, and he left in 2009.
I won't be happy unless we continue with the style that brought us success under Daniel Stendel, Valerien Ismael and Duff. The young age of our team suits the high-pressing game.
Look out for Fabio Jalo [below], who's done incredibly well for the under-18s. His recent call-up for Portugal's youth team is a sign that we could well have a gifted player on our hands.



Our key player will be Luca Connell, our midfield dynamo. He possesses every quality to play in a higher league.
Our most underrated player is Liam Kitching, because he's often been in the shadow of fellow central defender Mads Andersen, who's gone to Luton.
The pantomime villain will be our own James Norwood, master of the dark arts. He knows how to grind down the opposition, physically or verbally.
The thing my club really gets right is the bond between the community and the club. Ending the HEX shirt sponsor fiasco was a fantastic move, restoring faith. [Barnsley swiftly dropped the cryptocurrency company following fan protests in light of tweets promoting homophobia and conspiracy theories.]
The one change I'd make would be to seat the away supporters in the far top corner and not next to the tunnel!
The active player I'd love to have back is Carlton Morris. I never blamed him for moving on – he played under a couple of clueless bosses but gave his blood, sweat and tears for the club. He's since shown us all what a quality player he is by helping Luton to reach the promised land.
We'll finish in the top 10. Under Duff, I would have said in the top three.

FFT VERDICT 3RD

Losing Duff and captain Andersen means it's a question of minimising further disruption, because the Tykes' strength last season was understanding between units right through the team. If they can maintain that synergy, another promotion push should be in store.



BLACKPOOL



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 23rd **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Jerry Yates (15)

FAN FILE

CHRIS WALKER
@onedavebamber

Last season was a disaster. Everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong. The appointments of Michael Appleton and Mick McCarthy, combined with a flood of injuries and red cards, led to a deserved relegation.
The big talking point is the return of Neil Critchley [below]. He was our most successful boss since Ian Holloway, but the manner of his exit to become No.2 to Steven Gerrard at Aston Villa, having just signed a long-term contract here, still leaves a bitter taste. He's probably the best-qualified guy we could have got to lead our bid to bounce back this year, but it doesn't make him popular. He must start well, or inflatable snakes may make an appearance.
Fans think our owner is way past the honeymoon stage. There's goodwill for what Simon Sadler has done in getting the club back on its feet after decades of underinvestment from the previous owners, but he has to learn from the mistakes that resulted in relegation.



Our most underrated player is CJ Hamilton. Nearly all wingers are inconsistent, and he could cause a lot of problems for teams in this division.
The one player I'd happily drive to another club is Dom Thompson. We all expected far more from him, given his development at Brentford, but his decision-making is infuriating at times.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Tom Barkhuizen. We gave him his start in professional football – while there were issues during his time here, some of his comments towards the club since then have been disrespectful to fans who showed him great support.
The opposition player I'd love here is Colby Bishop. We should have signed him last summer, but it was blocked seemingly due to a medical issue. His 20 goals for Pompey and barely missing a minute of football suggests that it shouldn't have been a major concern.
I won't be happy unless we finish in the top six. League One looks weaker than it did last season.
Look out for Andy Lyons, who really impressed after coming over from the League of Ireland in January. It wouldn't be a surprise to see him get 10 goals from full-back.
We'll finish 4th, if I'm being optimistic.

FFT VERDICT 5TH

"I tried as hard as possible to find someone other than Neil," quipped Blackpool chief Sadler of Critchley's reappointment, following his acrimonious exit. The 44-year-old led the Tangerines up in 2021 and could do so again, earning himself a simpler compliment next year.



BOLTON WANDERERS



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 5th **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Dion Charles (21)

FAN FILE

CHRIS FLANAGAN
@CFlanaganFFT

Last season was a step in the right direction: we made it into the play-offs and thrashed champions Plymouth 4-0 at Wembley to win the EFL Trophy.
This season will be different because loanees James Trafford and Conor Bradley have departed, and they were our two best players last season. Each of them has a really bright future.
Our key player will be Dion Charles [below]. He scored 21 goals last season and will need to get that number again – we've relied on him a bit too much.
The opposition player I'd love here is Portsmouth's Colby Bishop. He's a good targetman who scores goals, and he played well with Charles at Accrington.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Barnsley's Luca Connell, an ex-Bolton player who rubbed fans up the wrong way during five league, cup and play-off encounters last season.
Look out for Aaron Morley, a clever passer of the ball with a penchant for great goals from outside the box.
The active player I'd love to have back is Dapo Afolayan, one day. His January sale to St. Pauli was very sad, because he'd won the hearts of Bolton supporters in his two years at the club.
Fans think our owner is a truly great Brittan. Sharon Brittan has got the club back on its feet since the dark days of Ken Anderson's reign.
The thing my club really gets right is fan engagement. As a result, we have sold 15,000 season tickets in League One – a remarkable number for us.
The one change I'd make would be to sort out the PA system around the stadium, as it sounds like it's stationed on the moon.
I'm least looking forward to playing Burton, who consistently manage to stop us winning, despite barely having a touch of the ball.
Our most underrated player is Gethin Jones, a dependable member of our defence who also links up really well in attack from the right of a back three.
I won't be happy unless we convert our dominance of games into more goals. Remember Spain vs Morocco at the World Cup, when Spain had all of the possession but just couldn't score? Yeah, we know the feeling.
We'll finish 2nd.



FFT VERDICT 1ST

In what looks a weaker league than last term, the Trotters will hope Nathan Baxter can replace Trafford in goal, with other new faces to come. Boss Ian Evatt has always delivered progress year on year, so a continuation of that trend should mean only one thing – promotion.



BRISTOL ROVERS



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 17th **FA CUP** Second Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Aaron Collins (16)

FAN FILE

NATHAN BEES
@nathbees

Last season was a mixed bag. Most fans would have taken a comfortable finish outside the relegation zone on our return to League One, but with the team having been hovering around the play-off places at Christmas, the opportunity was there to do better.
The big talking point is the revelation that Rovers have been in discussions with an investment company to be part of their plans to redevelop land at St Philip's Marsh, near Bristol city centre. It'd be the perfect place for a new home, but there's a long way to go first and we've been here before.
Fans think our owner is doing a good job, but Wael Al-Qadi will ultimately be judged on whether he can successfully deliver a new stadium.
The thing my club really gets right is the way it has rallied around defender Nick Anderton since his bone cancer diagnosis, with a minute's applause in the 16th minute of every match – No.16 being his squad number – while fundraising efforts have raised tens of thousands of pounds for him and his young family.
The one change I'd make would be for the club to provide better interviews with players by asking more than the usual, "It's going to be a very difficult game on Saturday, isn't it?" They used to do this, but don't as often any more.
I won't be happy unless we finish in the top 10. Outward expressions of ambition are all well and good – Joey Barton [above] has said he'll resign if he hasn't made Rovers "a credible Championship team" in two years – but the club have talked it up so much that falling short would be a setback.
Our key player will be midfielder Grant Ward [below], our best signing of last season. Tying him down to an extended contract this summer was a big shot in the arm for supporters' confidence levels.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Shaun Rooney, Fleetwood's Scottish full-back. He got on the wrong side of Gasheads last season with his histrionics and antagonistic behaviour.
We'll finish 10th, as things stand, but a strong end to the summer transfer window could have a transformative effect on our hopes.

FFT VERDICT 12TH

Catching the eye with a young, vibrant side, the Gas might need a touch more know-how, mainly in defence, and may have to replace star forward Aaron Collins. If they re-invest wisely, a top-half finish is attainable. One-time loanee Luke Thomas has joined from Barnsley.



BURTON ALBION



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 15th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Victor Adeboyejo (13)

FAN FILE

JACK STOUT
@BrewersTV

Last season was ultimately a success, after a horrendous start in which we took one point from eight games and were knocked out of the League Cup by Rochdale. Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink left, assistant Dino Maamria stepped up, and having still been 23rd in late January, the Brewers eventually sealed a comfortable 15th-place finish – incredible, given the first six months.
I won't be happy unless we have a prosperous summer window. Our last two have been pretty poor, to say the least, often resulting in Burton needing another large influx in January.
Our key player will be Sam Hughes [below]. The Brewers fans' player of the season was one of the division's best centre-backs; a rock defensively, but also vital in attacking set-pieces, with three goals and six assists.
Look out for midfielder Ciaran Gilligan.
I'm least looking forward to playing Reading – nothing against the club, but the away experience is dreadful.
Our most underrated player is Mark Helm. He was signed in January and looked tidy enough, but he really came into his own towards the season's end. He added some creativity, while his dazzling feet bamboozled defences and he scored a couple of awesome long-range efforts against Sheffield Wednesday and Cambridge.
The active player I'd love to have back is Victor Adeboyejo, who joined Bolton in January. A top-quality striker with an eye for a pass and for goal.
The pantomime villain will be Joey Barton. His constant belittling of the club, often calling Burton a hoofball team with no ideology, has become a running joke. And yet we've tended to get the better of him quite a lot, which makes for excellent viewing, especially his post-match interviews. Keep up the good work, Joey!
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is terrific right now. Maamria has spoken extremely well and backed it up by getting passionate performances out of the players. We were the ninth-best team in the league after he took over.
We'll finish 14th. Many people are describing League One as a rather uninspiring division this year. Burton should have enough to consolidate.



FFT VERDICT 15TH

The Brewers performed as a top-10 side after Maamria inherited the strugglers back in September, but key figures have since departed the Pirelli including on-loan striker Dale Taylor, so their chances hinge on whether recruit Cole Stockton can recapture his 2021-22 levels.



CAMBRIDGE UNITED



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 20th **FA CUP** Second Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Sam Smith (14)

FAN FILE

CONNOR O'REILLY
@ckknr

Last season was a true rollercoaster of emotions. We looked dead and buried at the start of April, given a two per cent chance of staying up, yet here we are, ready to go again in League One.
This season will be different because we've had a little flirt with a relegation battle and it has tired us all out.
The big talking point is releasing the core of the team that won promotion, then solidified. We don't know how the new team will look, but we're excited.
Our key player will be Jack Lankester [below]. No pressure, but Sam Smith, Harvey Knibbs and Joe Ironside have left, so he must spearhead our attack.
Our most underrated player is Will Mannion. We've been blessed with the brilliant Dimitar Mitov in goal, but Mannion covered well when he was needed most. It'd be great to see him get a shot following Mitov's departure.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Brandon Haunstrup. It just hasn't worked out at all, sadly.
Look out for Kai Yearn [above]. The kid oozes class – it's only a matter of time before he breaks into the first team and stars in it, even at the age of 18.
I won't be happy unless we beat Posh again. Last season witnessed our first league clashes in 20 years, and beating them at home to aid our great escape was truly special. They only bottled the play-offs so they can face us again.
Fans think our owner is doing some excellent work, helping us to buy back our stadium and looking to modernise the Abbey now we have a future there.
The thing my club really gets right is promoting mental health. We are offering therapy through Mynurva for every single season ticket holder, and it's available 24/7 and for anything, not just football. It's a brilliant idea that makes me proud to be a U's fan.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is stable. Fans called for change when we appeared to be destined for the drop, but Mark Bonner masterminded survival with an almost perfect April.
If he left, he should be replaced by Boreham Wood's Luke Garrard. It's absolutely staggering that he hasn't been given a Football League chance.
We'll finish between 14th and 18th – just not a final-day scrap again. Please.



FFT VERDICT 23RD

Bonner has achieved great things at Cambridge, but after last term's dice with the drop, it's a big rebuild at the Abbey. Early business hasn't been hugely impressive on paper, so another dogfight could be in store. Finding a replacement for departing top scorer Smith is vital.



CARLISLE UNITED



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 5th **FA CUP** Second Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Kristian Dennis (21)

FAN FILE
LEE ROONEY
@bruntonbugle

Last season was beyond even our wildest expectations. All of the experts had us finishing around 18th or 19th [in our defence, we predicted 16th – Ed.] so to turn things around and win the play-off final was unbelievable.
The big talking point is whether ace midfielder Owen Moxon will stay. He's going to have a queue of suitors after a brilliant breakthrough season with us. He deserves to play at a higher level, so I don't think anybody would begrudge him a transfer, but if he is off, it would be good to get the move (and the money!) sorted fairly quickly.
Our key player will be Jon Mellish [below]. Although Moxon was superb, Big Jon was essential to how we play, as a box-to-box defender in a back three, causing chaos all over the pitch. He's now our longest-serving player and a huge fans' favourite.
Our most underrated player is Jack Armer, outstanding as a wing-back on the left side. It's criminal that he didn't feature in the League Two Team of the Season. He's racked up more than 100 league appearances for Carlisle and only turned 22 in April.
Look out for Taylor Charters, 21. He had a really good spell in the team before Christmas, only for injury to rule him out for four months. He bounced back well in the play-offs and struck the winning penalty at Wembley.
The thing my club really gets right is the matchday fan experience, which I never would have said several years ago. It's improved hugely – getting to the ground early these days is a must.
I'm least looking forward to playing Exeter, a long old slog for both clubs.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he can walk on water. He's produced a squad, with real togetherness, that can switch with ease between two different formations in a game. Paul Simpson [above] has a job for life here.
If he left, he should be replaced by another person with close links to the club: Peter Murphy at Annan Athletic or Danny Grainger at Workington, both ex-players. The latter helped to coach our youth side last season.
We'll finish a solid 12th with a couple of good cup runs thrown in. I think we will exceed expectations once again.



FFT VERDICT 24TH

Simpson worked miracles to inspire Carlisle to promotion: he's ready for League One, but it's less clear the club is, structurally. If Moxon stays, United need their star midfielder at his best every week to have a chance. Losing top scorer Kristian Dennis didn't help.



CHARLTON ATHLETIC



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 10th **FA CUP** Second Round **LEAGUE CUP** Quarter-Final **TOP SCORER** Jesurun Rak-Sakyi (above left, 15)

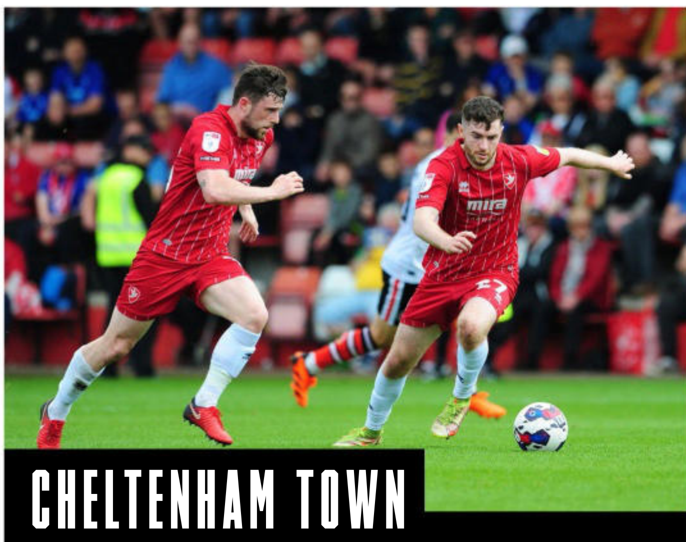
FAN FILE
NATASHA EVERITT
@natashaeveritt7

Last season was disappointing, again.
The big talking point is Thomas Sandgaard putting the club up for sale.
I won't be happy unless we can keep Miles Leaburn, and Dean Holden & Co have money to spend on transfers.
The thing my club really gets right is giving players from our youth academy first-team opportunities.
The one change I'd make would be our naive chairman, but also to get the stadium, training ground and club all under one umbrella again.
Our key player will be George Dobson [below] because we need to build the team's spine. It's hard to pick just one player, though. Chuks Aneke will also boost us so much if he can remain fit.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is positive. The supporters have warmed to Holden instantly. He's a breath of fresh air and obviously cares for the club, despite not having any prior links to it as former managers did – Johnnie Jackson, Lee Bowyer, Chris Powell...
If he left, he should be replaced by Powelly or Bowyer – I'd love either of them back at The Valley. Alternatively, it would need to be a manager who's a proven promotion-winner.
Our most underrated player is teen talent Tyreece Campbell [above right].
Look out for Deji Elerewe or Zach Mitchell, promising young defenders.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is George Edmundson, because he shushed the Covered End in a game last autumn when Ipswich thought they had won it. They went 4-2 up four minutes into stoppage time and Charlton still came back to draw 4-4.
The opposition player I'd love here is Peterborough's Jonson Clarke-Harris.
The active player I'd love to have back is Southampton's Joe Aribo.
I'm least looking forward to playing Bolton. We always lose to them.
We'll finish 6th, is what I'll say, but it depends if the club is taken over in good enough time to delve into the transfer market and buy a few players. As I write, we still await EFL approval for the offer from Joshua Friedman's consortium to go through. If that does finally happen, and we spend money on signings, then we should be aiming for higher than last term's 10th place.



FFT VERDICT 8TH

Charlton's steady haul of 38 points from 25 games under Holden have boosted play-off hopes this term, but replacing departed Crystal Palace loanee Jesurun Rak-Sakyi is essential. So is keeping Leaburn fit (and out of the clutches of others) as the Addicks seek some stability.



CHELTENHAM TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 16th **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Alfie May (22)

FAN FILE

LEE ETHERIDGE
@ctfc_hEaLeR

Last season was a resounding success, with the preservation of our League One status comfortably achieved, in Wade Elliott's first season. He deserves a huge amount of credit.
This season will be different because expectations have risen. Curtis Davies' arrival from Derby looks interesting.
The big talking point is recruitment, with director of football Micky Moore leaving for Shrewsbury and leading scorer Alfie May expected to depart.
I won't be happy unless we take the FA Cup seriously. We have an awful record and have crashed out to lower opposition numerous times.
Our key player will be Aidan Keena [above, right], our club-record signing last term. He's already shown that he's capable of finding the net regularly.
Look out for Adulai Sambu, a young midfielder who impressed out on loan. He's fluent in multiple languages and his football journey was documented by Sky TV series *One Shot*.
Our most underrated player is Liam Sercombe: a quiet but effective leader.
The opposition player I'd love here is Derby midfielder Conor Hourihane. He's an exceptional player for League One and would be superb in helping the younger players in our team.
I'm least looking forward to playing Carlisle – a painfully long drive, certain to be scheduled for a Tuesday night.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Ellis Chapman, who constantly flatters to deceive.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Jonny Smith, wherever he ends up after leaving Burton. He's an ex-Cheltenham loanee who played a handful of games for us, but he thinks we all despise him and gladly goads the fans whenever we face him.
The one change I'd make would be to get the catering sorted once and for all. We've complained for so many years about the appalling offering.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Elliott [below] will be a far better boss for the eye-opening experiences of last season. If he left, he should be replaced by [Kidderminster's] Russell Penn, a former Robin who is doing a very good job in the lower leagues.
We'll finish a respectable 15th.



FFT VERDICT 22ND

The Robins chucked in a fair few no-shows last season, but Alfie May's quality converted the better performances into results. With the forward almost certain to go, they might play well without reward more often, meaning less leeway. This could be a struggle...



DERBY COUNTY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 7th **FA CUP** Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round **TOP SCORER** David McGoldrick (25)

FAN FILE

OLLIE WRIGHT
@derbycountyblog

Last season was a relief, in having our club back following administration; a novelty, in that we played in the third tier for the first time in nearly 40 years; and ultimately agonising, as we missed out on the play-offs on the final day.
The big talking point is whether Paul Warne [above], in his first full season with Derby, will be able to build a team that is strong enough to get back into the Championship. His preferred way of playing – a high-tempo, hard-pressing 3-5-2 – requires a different profile of player to the squad that he inherited.
Our key player will be whichever striker is signed to replace David McGoldrick, because 22 league goals is a lot of firepower that needs replacing.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's charismatic and candid, which is refreshing. However, it's still not clear how a genuine 'Warne team' will play at Derby and we need to see how the squad rebuild goes, then see early signs of progress towards promotion.
If he left, he should be replaced by Carlisle's Paul Simpson, a much-loved Rams winger in the 1990s and also part of Steve McClaren's backroom staff at Derby in the 2010s – but I hope Warne won't leave.
Fans think our owner is God. David Clowes [below] was one of few people who realistically could have prevented Derby from going into liquidation; Rams fans will be forever grateful for his last-gasp intervention.
The one change I'd make would be to have less annoying pre-match music. Jamie Thrasivoulou's fantastic poem, *We Are Derby*, is more than enough to get the atmosphere going before players emerge from the tunnel.
The active player I'd love to have back is Festy Ebosele, who went to Udinese last year. The jet-heeled wideman would have been perfect for Warne's system, having a lot of fun torturing League One defenders from a right-sided wing-back role.
I'm least looking forward to playing Wycombe. The anger that their owner, Rob Couhig, generated by attempting to sue Derby at a time when our club was at dire risk of being liquidated will never subside.
We'll finish 2nd.



FFT VERDICT 2ND

Last summer's takeover happened the same month as opening day, so preparation was rushed, but this year the Rams had a running jump into recruitment with Joe Ward, Callum Elder and Curtis Nelson all decent early defensive recruits. Strong improvement looks likely.



EXETER CITY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 14th **FA CUP** Second Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Sam Nombe (17)

FAN FILE

THE BIG BANK THEORY
@bigbankpod

Last season was thoroughly decent, though there was a fair bit of upheaval.
This season will be different because it's Gary Caldwell's first full season. Can we really be an effective possession-based team? Finding someone to replace Bradford-bound Kevin McDonald will also be crucial.
Look out for Pedro Borges [below]. The kid is rangy! He's also good on the ball and looked completely unfazed last season as a 17-year-old playing against the blokes of League One.
I'm least looking forward to playing Carlisle. It's flipping miles away.
The opposition player I'd love here is Jay Stansfield. Every City fan would love him to come back for one more season. Having him return last term and topping it off with a final-day hat-trick was probably the perfect end to that story, but we'd love it to carry on for just a little longer.
Our most underrated player is Demetri Mitchell, a classic City signing: his previous clubs' fans all said he was rubbish and they were all wrong.
I won't be happy unless we bring in a decent keeper! We've had a couple of great ones in a row [on loan], but now we need another. Good feet, please.
The active player I'd love to have back is any of Ollie Watkins, Ethan Ampadu or Matt Grimes, if we're being unrealistic. On a more down-to-earth setting, David Wheeler would be ace. He's a great player and a top lad.
The one change I'd make would be to remember that, despite Cornish complaints, Devon is the home of the pasty – so we should stop running out of them at half-time.
Fans think our owner is... well, we're fan-owned, so what do I think of myself? A lot.
The pantomime villain will be Caldwell [above]. After two bosses who stayed very cool, in Paul Tisdale and Matt Taylor, I'm enjoying something different from the new gaffer. He has the air of a very nice Scottish fellow who, if insulted, will pull your man bun clean off. Has leapt into the community side of things and has brought in some excellent players. I'm optimistic he can continue to help us progress.
We'll finish just outside the play-offs.



FFT VERDICT 14TH

After crucial departures, head of recruitment Marcus Flitcroft will be as pivotal as ever as Caldwell's side intend to build on a positive first season up. Poaching vibrant 22-year-old wing-back Vincent Harper from Eastleigh was a great move towards achieving that goal.



FLEETWOOD TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 13th **FA CUP** Fifth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Carlos Mendes Gomes (9)

FAN FILE

BEN KNAPMAN
@ftfcknappers

Last season was a big success. We were competitive, we improved over time and we managed to accumulate 50 points – and then more – with ease.
This season will be different because Scott Brown has had his year to learn and make mistakes. Now the pressure is on to improve on the weaknesses and strengthen the strengths further.
The big talking point is how chairman Andy Pilley's sentencing for fraud will affect his businesses and the club.
I won't be happy unless we get to 50 points – that's the most important thing – but also play more attacking football at times.
The pantomime villain will be Bristol Rovers' Joey Barton, former Fleetwood manager. His comments last season about Fleetwood were... interesting!
The opposition player I'd love here is Dan Crowley, now at Notts County. He impressed me in his Morecambe spell. He can play in different positions and has an eye for goal.
Our key player will be Jack Marriott [above, left]. He arrived at the end of January and scored eight league goals in the rest of the season – if we can keep him firing, he can bag at least 20.
Our most underrated player is Josh Vela [below]. No one really mentions the job he does, putting in hard yards, breaking up play and providing that layer between defence and attack. You need that player. He's a constant 7/10.
Keep an eye out for Junior Quitirna, who joined us from Waterford in the League of Ireland and looked pacy and fresh in his few games after that.
The thing my club really gets right is the relationship between the players, staff and supporters, who are treated in the correct manner, with good coach prices and the cheapest season ticket in League One.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Brown has got results but sometimes he plays not to lose, rather than win. That is frustrating, but he's done a good job overall in his 12 months here.
If he left, he should be replaced by Danny Cowley, a fantastic manager who needs a good owner and training ground to work with his side. Fleetwood Town have that.
We'll finish 16th.



FFT VERDICT 17TH

Owner Pilley's legal battles have hindered preparations, but Danny Mayor and Ryan Broom are both eye-catching signings to go with proven performers in Marriott, Josh Earl and Shaun Rooney. Brendan Wiredu and Cian Hayes should minimise any potential drop-off.



LEYTON ORIENT



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO Winners **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Paul Smyth (10)

FAN FILE

MAT ROPER
@Pandamonium1881

Last season was absolutely magical. For many of us, it was our first Football League title – the last being in 1970 – so what could have been better than sitting top for 40 weeks of the season?
The big talking point is the inevitable vultures hovering around some of our players after that success.
Our key player will be Jordan Brown [below], potentially. The 22-year-old has put pen to paper in signing a new contract and could be a huge driving influence in the O's midfield.
Fans think our owner is magnificent. Nigel Travis has steadied the ship, overseen two promotions in six years and invested, albeit not wildly, to get us here. Add that to the levels of communication and transparency, and Bob – or Nigel – is your uncle.
The one change I'd make would be to detonate the four corners of the stadium – ensuring that the residents have moved out first, of course – and increase to a 13,000-plus capacity.
I'm least looking forward to playing Stevenage. They'll probably beat us, it's the most boring and soulless away trip ever, and Steve Evans is their manager.
Our most underrated player is defender Jayden Sweeney, although his stock rose as he came in towards the end of last season. He's only 21 but could be a jewel in the crown, even at a higher level.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's brilliant. Richie Wellens is tactically minded, passionate, a wind-up and a winner, with a nigh-on 55 per cent win ratio – I'm surprised there haven't been calls for a statue next to the great Laurie Cunningham, to be honest!
If he left, he should be replaced by Gareth Ainsworth.
The pantomime villain will be our director of football, Martin Ling: loved by some but loathed by others. I can picture him now in a Widow Twankey outfit, negotiating with Brighton over the return of young starlet Ed Turns.
We'll finish a healthy 12th, though it's hard to predict at this stage. Quite a few are going with the usual tagline of 'survive', and there is that, but I'd sincerely hope that our momentum, our manager, our board and our fans can see us comfortably into mid-table.



FFT VERDICT 16TH

League Two's champions have lost star men Lawrence Vigouroux and Paul Smyth, in goal and attack respectively, but old heads Omar Beckles and Darren Pratley stay on. Mid-table is likely with Crewe's Dan Agyei and Wellens favourite Ethan Galbraith two excellent additions.



LINCOLN CITY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 11th **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** Fourth Round **TOP SCORER** Ben House (below, 13)

FAN FILE

GARY HUTCHINSON
@Staceywestblog

Last season was very promising. We had our highs and lows – a decent League Cup run was offset by not winning in the league for two months or so – but Mark Kennedy's first season was a success overall. We were tough to beat and attacked well at times.
The big talking point is still Ethan Erhahon [above], after his arrival in January. He was a significant purchase and he started very well indeed. If he maintains his form, we've got a future Premier League player on our hands.
Our key player will be Erhahon or Ben House – our leading man, when only 18 months ago he was playing National League football for Eastleigh. If he gets the service, House will score 15 goals from open play this season.
The active player I'd love to have back is Harry Toffolo, who'd love our 3-4-3 system. He's a top lad, to boot.
Look out for youth product Freddie Draper, now back from his loan with Drogheda in Ireland. He struck seven goals and three assists in his final 10 games and was back for pre-season.
I'm least looking forward to playing Bolton. They're like a Steve Evans side – aggressive, dirty off the ball and masters of the dark arts – but they're also one of the division's best teams.
The opposition player I'd love here is Mark Helm from Burton. It's one out of left field, but I really like him – he's comfortable on the ball, adventurous, and looks like he'll only accrue value. Burton have a decent eye for players.
Fans think our owner is the best we've ever had. Clive Nates' tenure as chairman has seen us go from strength to strength. If I came home to find he'd broken into my house and drunk all of my beer, I'd offer to crawl on my hands and knees to the shop eight miles away to buy him some more.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is upbeat. Finishing 11th earned Kennedy some credit and there's no smoke and mirrors with him: if he tried something and it didn't work, he admits it.
If he left, he should be replaced by Chris Laming, my podcast co-host. He just took Wragby's Sunday League side to the Jock Mitchell Trophy final and won, so why not?
We'll finish 12th.

FFT VERDICT 9TH

The underdog specialists go into this season with solid foundations, but must find a way to break sides down. Yet if Erhahon and House perform as hoped, and if Lukas Jensen can adequately replace the excellent Carl Rushworth in goal, a top-six tilt could be on the cards.



NORTHAMPTON TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 3rd **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Sam Hoskins (22)

FAN FILE

JOE BALL
@jballie94

Last season was excellent, because we gained promotion back to League One after two years in the fourth tier.
This season will be different because we'll be facing a tougher challenge. I can't imagine us being as successful as we were last term.
The big talking point is whether we'll be able to stabilise ourselves back in this division now that we have a more settled squad, compared with previous promotions in 2019-20 and 2015-16.
Our key player will be Jon Guthrie. We'll need a strong defence if we're to do well in this league.
Look out for 20-year-old Max Dyche [below], son of Everton boss Sean. He did well when called upon last year and could feature more this season.
The active player I'd love to have back is Liam Roberts, an excellent keeper who is now at Middlesbrough.
The thing my club really gets right is community work – they've won various awards for that, which is great to see.
The one change I'd make would be to finally get the East Stand finished. It looks awful at the moment and has done for the last few years, ever since work on it stalled.
Our most underrated player is Will Hondermarck, who joined us from Barnsley in January. A full pre-season should help him to progress further.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Danny Hylton. After much hype when he first arrived from Luton last summer, he ended up being a disappointing signing.
The opposition player I'd love here is Alfie May – that isn't realistic, of course, but he's a fantastic player.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is pure love, from the majority of people. Jon Brady got the club promoted and has a good connection with the fans.
If he left, he should be replaced by Matt Gray from Sutton.
I'm least looking forward to playing Peterborough. They'll be confident of securing another six points from us.
I won't be happy unless we stay in League One. We don't want to keep switching divisions every other year – we've been promoted or relegated in five of the previous eight campaigns.
We'll finish 16th.



FFT VERDICT 20TH

A crowded treatment room truly stretched Brady's adaptability last season, but still the Cobblers found a way to automatic promotion. Northampton will need greater squad availability to stay up – so signing the reliable Patrick Brough from Barrow was a promising start.



OXFORD UNITED



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 19th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Cameron Brannagan (12)

FAN FILE

TONY FALLOWS
@t_manorpodcast

Last season was generally a massive underachievement. With one of the league's better budgets, we managed to almost fall through the trapdoor.
This season will be different because Karl Robinson has gone. After nearly five years in charge, Robbo was rightly sacked for bringing us to the brink of relegation. Liam Manning has quite the rebuilding job on his hands.
The big talking point is the stadium. With the lease at the Kassam up in 2026 and no chance of renewal, we need to build a new ground, and fast.
The pantomime villain will be Robbo, if he turns up at another team in the league. We had some great times, but the state he left the team in is seen by many as unforgivable. In the short term, at least, he'll receive some stick.
Look out for Gatlin O'Donkor [below], also known as GOD. He has struggled for goals since breaking into the first team, but his all-round play at the age of 18 suggests potential.
Our key player will be Cameron Brannagan once again. The midfield dynamo is rumoured to now be the highest-paid player in Oxford's history, and he's certainly playing a league below his abilities.
The opposition player I'd love here is Jonson Clarke-Harris. With club legend Matty Taylor released in June, we are desperately short of goals and a senior centre-forward. Clarke-Harris was last season's top scorer and leads the line with an aggression we lack as a team.
Our most underrated player is tricky winger Tyler Goodrham, a 19-year-old youth-team product. Talk of a loan move to the league below seems harsh – he was a breath of fresh air last term and proved he's already capable of being a match-winner.
I'm least looking forward to playing Reading. Meeting our second-biggest rivals for a league clash is long overdue – we last played in the same division in 2000-01. They're a mess off the pitch, but derbies are a leveller and defeat would be even more painful as a result.
We'll finish 12th. There's a lot of work to do to rebuild this squad. With some shrewd acquisitions, we might sneak a play-off push, but with a below-par transfer window... hello, League Two.



FFT VERDICT 7TH

Recruitment looks collaborative this summer, and it's borne fruit with Ruben Rodrigues joining from Notts County and local lad Josh McEachran from MK Dons. The attacking midfielders could help the Yellows return to play-off contention after last year's slump.



PETERBOROUGH UNITED



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 6th **FA CUP** Second Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Jonson Clarke-Harris (29)

FAN FILE

CHRIS DOWSETT
@ChrisDowsett17

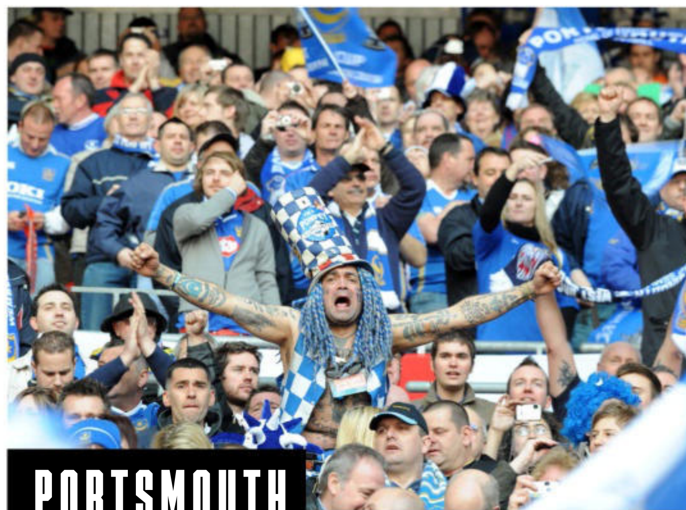
Last season was up and down. If you'd said before the season that we would lose a play-off on penalties to Sheffield Wednesday, most of us would have taken that – but the manner in which it happened [having won the first leg 4-0], made it so much worse.
Our key player will be Ephron Mason-Clark [above right]. His pace, power and directness meant he adapted to League One quickly from Barnet in the National League. Many clubs are now casting a jealous eye in his direction.
Our most underrated player is Harrison Burrows, who's probably been a victim of his own versatility so far.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is goalkeeper Christy Pym, if he hasn't been driven out already. Publicly criticising the club that pays your wages is a terrible look.
The active player I'd love to have back is Ivan Toney – would the FA lessen his ban so that he could play in League One and keep up his fitness...?



I'm least looking forward to playing Fleetwood. It's a long way, we always seem to play our away game in winter and they just did the double over us.
The thing my club really gets right is the community work and contribution of our mascot, Peter Burrow [below], on the next generation of supporters. The club have built areas in the ground for young people and also visit local schools, which has resulted in young fans becoming regular match-goers.
The one thing I'd change would be to review the ticket prices. We are very expensive for the third tier and our facilities are tired.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Bolton's Ricardo Santos. He was rubbish for us but seems to have turned into Paolo Maldini since he left, and has a knack of scoring against us.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is happy, mostly, though a vocal minority think the club should look elsewhere. Most clubs would be delighted to have a man with his CV in this division – Darren Ferguson is the most successful manager in our history.
If he left, he should be replaced by Darren Ferguson. Again.
We'll finish 10th, given the likely upheaval with transfers this summer.

FFT VERDICT 6TH

Ferguson's impact after rejoining couldn't quite earn him a fifth promotion with the Posh, due to *that* play-off collapse. The club are now opting for a younger squad – Archie Collins' arrival from Exeter stands out – but their experienced gaffer will keep them competitive.



PORTSMOUTH



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 8th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Colby Bishop (24)

FAN FILE

BRENDON BONE
@brendonvbone

Last season was disappointing. We saw lots of promises under the Cowley brothers last summer, but ultimately we were also-rans all campaign long and didn't look like troubling the top six at any point after October.
The big talking point is the ownership. The optimism that accompanied the Eisners' arrival seven years ago has largely dissipated.
Fans think our owners are taking the old ground forward, though we need some success on the pitch to keep the supporters engaged – we're still stuck where we started.
I won't be happy unless we finish in the top six. Anything less is a failure.
Our key player will be Tom Lowery [below]. He is absolute quality, but he suffered an injury mid-season and we really struggled without him. Hopefully he can stay fit because we rely on him.
Our most underrated player is Connor Ogilvie – in my opinion, he's one of the best defenders in the league.



Look out for Paddy Lane, who's just starting to show why we bought him from Fleetwood in January. We've also signed a young Northern Irish lad this summer – Terry Devlin, from Glentoran – and we're hearing reports that he's going to be a cracking player.
The active player I'd love to have back is Matt Ritchie – one of our own – though it's absolutely a pipe dream.
The one change I'd make would be Fratton Park. We're getting there, off the pitch, but the old girl isn't fit for purpose long-term and that'll always hold us back, unfortunately.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is full-back Denver Hume. Sometimes your club signs a player and you just can't understand what the management have seen in him.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that John Mousinho is honest, which I like, but his honeymoon period is over and we need to start seeing the bit between this teeth now. I'm happy to give him time; genuinely, I'm not sure there's a manager out there who can wake us from this slumber.
We'll finish in the top six – at least, that has to be the main target. It all depends on recruitment, because we lost half the team again last season.

FFT VERDICT 4TH

Business has been left field, but highly regarded sporting director Richard Hughes values thinking outside the box. He did that to poach Mousinho from Oxford, who managed 39 points from 23 games – form that gets you in the mix, especially if they keep Colby Bishop.



PORT VALE



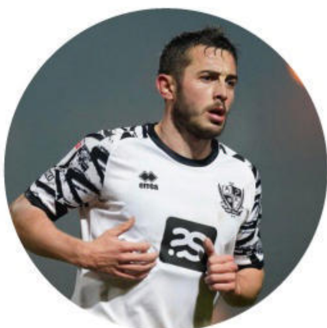
LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 18th **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Ellis Harrison (11)

FAN FILE

PHIL BOWERS
@PhilJBowers

Last season was mystifying. After a middling start, an impressive October through to December lifted Vale to just outside the play-off places, then from January onwards everything fell apart.
The big talking point is where the club is headed – there's talk of reducing the budgets and investing more in younger players – and the faith being placed in new manager Andy Crosby [above].
This season will be different because Darrell Clarke, who was very popular with supporters, is no longer at the helm, and there will be real scrutiny now as to whether that decision will pay off in the long term.
I'm least looking forward to playing Leyton Orient. They're a nice, well-run club, but it's a vile journey with no car parking at the end of it.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he has to hit the ground running to get the fans onside quickly. Some wanted an experienced replacement for Clarke, or for Clarke himself to come back.
The opposition player I'd love here is Peterborough's Jonson Clarke-Harris.
Fans think our owner is exceptional for the work she has done in helping the local community and raising the club's profile. There were questions asked, however, about the decision to part with Clarke.
The one change I'd make would be to the pitch – it was awful at some points last season and it didn't exactly go unnoticed, either. Work is being done on it over the summer, at least.
Our key player will be Nathan Smith, prime agitator of centre-forwards and no doubt keen to improve a defence that shipped 71 goals last season.
The pantomime villain will be Nathan Smith!
Our most underrated player is Ben Garrity [below]. He shone in his first season, 2021-22, scoring 12 league goals from midfield, but was made to do plenty of water-carrying last term. He does lots of running for little credit.
Look out for James Plant, who broke into the first team at the end of the season, harassed Ipswich's midfield, then scored against Charlton and Plymouth. It could be a big campaign for the 18-year-old.
We'll finish 15th.



FFT VERDICT 21ST

Vale's decision to sack Clarke was unpopular, so internal replacement Crosby is already on the back foot. With funds limited and key men David Worrall and Tom Pett gone, a tough year awaits – though Conor Grant and goalkeeper Connor Ripley are good signings on paper.



READING



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 22nd **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Andy Carroll, Tom Ince (9)

FAN FILE

SIMEON PICKUP
@TheTilehurstEnd

The big talking point is owner Dai Yongge, who has increasingly lost the fans' faith due to mismanagement and charges from the Football League. We really hope he will sell up ASAP.
Our key player will be Tom Holmes [above], who's become a dependable, modern and versatile centre-half.
Our most underrated player is Andy Yiadom: dynamic and experienced.
Fans think our owner is naive, distant and reckless. The Royals have gone drastically backwards on his watch. He has trusted the wrong people, barely communicated with supporters, and gambled massively by overspending with no long-term strategy.
The thing my club really gets right is the academy – it's superb for a club of our size, has produced some real gems such as Michael Olise, and is regarded highly by other outfits.
The active player I'd love to have back is John Swift. We never replaced his creativity and goal threat.
Look out for 19-year-old right-back Kelvin Abrefa [below] – an energetic, positive player who can also fill in at centre-half, wing-back or in midfield.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Andy Carroll. A nice guy who works hard, but he limits the side tactically.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is underwhelmed. We were disappointed to see a tantalisingly close move for Chris Wilder fall through, so rookie Ruben Selles has a lot of doubters to win over early doors.
If he left, he should be replaced by Graeme Murty, as it feels inevitable that he will become our manager one day. He's a fan favourite who has vast experience of developing players and who learned from the best manager English football has ever seen – Steve Coppell, of course.
I'm least looking forward to playing Stevenage. We haven't played them that often, and yet they've had a habit of finding a surprise win against us.
The pantomime villain will be former close rivals Oxford, as we'll finally be playing them again after a two-decade gap. Supporters have been desperate for a good ol' local derby.
We'll finish 7th, falling just short.



FFT VERDICT 11TH

Having started pre-season with a wafer-thin squad and off-field concerns, it's unlikely the Royals will bounce back straight away, even if new manager Selles works wonders. With Tom Ince gone, 2023-24 is about laying the ground work for a more sustainable future.



SHREWSBURY TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 12th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Luke Leahy (below, 12)

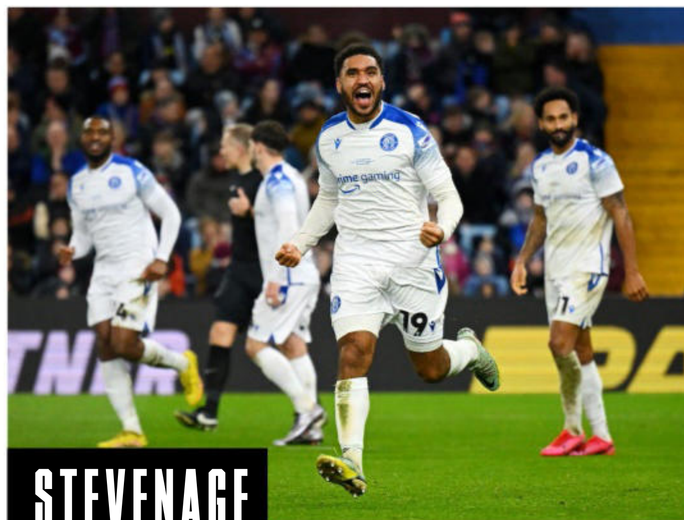
FAN FILE
ANDREW GREENWAY

Last season was a pleasant surprise! Mid-table obscurity was welcome after recent years' relegation dogfights.
The big talking point is the exits of manager Steve Cotterill and chief executive Brian Caldwell. Both were well regarded, especially Steve, who put his heart and soul into the club.
This season will be different because we now have Micky Moore as director of football. We're going from stability to insecurity and hoping for the best...
Our key player will be Luke Leahy, a consistent, hard-working midfielder with a lovely left foot, who scores goals.
Our most underrated player is Chey Dunkley. Solid and unassuming at the back and chips in with set-piece goals.
The pantomime villain will be Aiden O'Brien. Injured early following his signing last summer and will either show us all what he can do or leave and probably score against us.
Fans think our owner is a hero and, despite the unexpected changes, we hope that there is a plan and reason behind Roland Wycherley's decisions.
The opposition player I'd love here is Peterborough's Jonson Clarke-Harris. Shrews have been missing a ruthless goalscorer for a number of years now.
The active player I'd love to have back is Connor Goldson. A great pro, he has had an excellent time at Rangers – he should come home!
The thing my club really gets right is its community work. Local businesses as sponsors, engagement with schools.
The one change I'd make would be supporting the youth squads more, ring-fencing local talent, bringing them through into the first team. It's been a long while since Joe Hart.
I'm least looking forward to playing Charlton. Quite a rivalry has developed since the 2017-18 play-off semi-finals.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is underwhelming. We were expecting a low-risk safe pair of hands, not Matt Taylor [above], sacked by League Two Walsall in February 2022 after seven straight defeats left them 21st in the table. Fingers will be pointed at Micky if this goes wrong. It's a big change, in both people and culture, at the club.
We'll finish 17th. A step back, before a step forward, given the uncertainty.



FFT VERDICT 18TH

The Shrews' restructuring, with Micky Moore coming in as director of football even after a fine top-half finish, means the club will adopt a more developmental model. Carl Winchester has made his loan from Sunderland permanent, but it may not all deliver instant results.



STEVENAGE



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 2nd **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Third Round **TOP SCORER** Luke Norris, Jamie Reid (14)

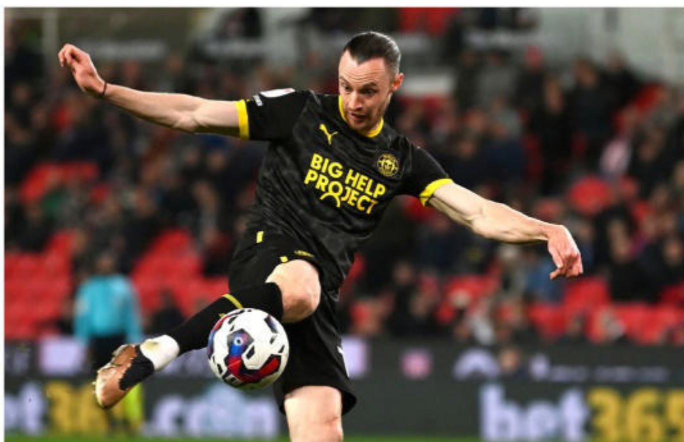
FAN FILE
PETE HAYMAN
@boroguide

Last season was surely beyond the wildest expectations of even the most optimistic fans. Automatic promotion would have been enough, but to also have a memorable FA Cup day out at Aston Villa, and to win, was fantastic.
The big talking point is how we will fare in League One. We have both the budget and determination to keep ourselves out of danger, but what else is possible? How will all of the new players fit into what was a tight squad? What happens if things don't get off to a good start?
Our key player will be one of our new arrivals, Nathan Thompson. At 32, he brings a shed-load of experience at this level. Signing on-loan keeper Taye Ashby-Hammond on a permanent deal from Fulham is very significant, too.
The thing my club really gets right is the clear ethos and identity that we have got back under boss Steve Evans – something we arguably missed since Graham Westley's third spell in charge.
The one change I'd make would be to add more and better merchandise. A mini-kit or sticker to go in the car wouldn't go amiss.
I'm least looking forward to playing Northampton – we just have an awful, awful record against them.
Our most underrated player is Jamie Reid [above], or 'Big Goal Reidy' as he came to be known after popping up with goals at key moments. He even ended up as our joint-top scorer, in a more productive campaign all round.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is extremely high, and it's not difficult to see why. It doesn't quite mean he has carte blanche, however. A few older fans still have a lingering unease with Evans' previous misdemeanours, while his occasional touchline shenanigans aren't exactly acclaimed. The bottom line, though, is that he got us promoted against seemingly enormous odds – everything else is a footnote.
Fans think our owner is keeping us on the straight and narrow, ensuring the club's long-term stability as much as possible, which is something that can't be taken for granted in the Football League these days.
We'll finish 14th. I made the same prediction last season...



FFT VERDICT 19TH

Skipper Carl Piergianni produced one of the greatest seasons ever seen by a League Two centre-back, as a solid team effort took Boro up. A productive window – hometown midfielder Nick Freeman joins from Wycombe – should give Evans' troops enough to amass 50 points.



WIGAN ATHLETIC



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP 24th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Will Keane (12)

FAN FILE
SEAN LIVESEY
@livesey99

Last season was infuriating, frustrating and totally unnecessary. Two bosses sacked midway through the campaign, failing to pay wages on schedule not once but five times, huge overspending and points deductions that resulted in relegation. It was without a doubt the worst season we've had at that level.
The big talking point is still having a club to support. It's not a stretch to imagine that Wigan Athletic could have ceased to exist this summer if Mike Danson hadn't come in to save us.
Our key player will be Will Keane [above], if we manage to retain him.
Fans think our owner is our saviour. Danson is a Wiganer done good; from a family of coal miners, he made his money in data and analytics. He's one of Britain's richest men, and while he's Wigan-born rather than Wigan-based, we have faith he's here for the right reasons, as a Labour Party donor and owner of the *New Statesman* with links to this fiercely Labour-voting town.
The one change I'd make would be a new ticket provider. Have two tickets in your household? Want to buy tickets with your pals at away games? Sorry, not with Future Ticketing.
Look out for 20-year-old defender James Carragher. Jamie's offspring has been with Wigan since his early teens and bubbling under for a number of seasons now, but last term's loan at Oldham ended in injury. With a reset squad, thanks to the restructuring, he might get his first-team opportunity.
The active player I'd love to have back is Nick Powell. A player just clicks at your club sometimes, and Powell is that player for Wigan.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Shaun Maloney [below] was a shining light in a season of woe. He couldn't be any worse than the woeful Kolo Toure, and he wasn't. Our performances and results picked up, while his enthusiasm and knowledge of the club is central to everything we want to be.
If he left, he should be replaced by Roberto Martinez. Maloney is one of his disciples, and although he's a bit busy with Portugal these days, it'd be lovely to have Bob back. One day.
We'll finish mid-table. Starting on -8 need not be terminal for our chances.



FFT VERDICT 13TH

The Latics have found financial stability, with a takeover complete, wages paid and debts settled. Maloney still has that eight-point deduction to negotiate but, after he galvanized the club last season, a surge into mid-table is possible if they can use that as motivation.



WYCOMBE WANDERERS



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 9th **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Anis Mehmeti, Lewis Wing (9)

FAN FILE
TOM HANCOCK
@Tom_Hancock_

Last season was anticlimactic in the end. I suppose that was to be expected after we lost the greatest manager in the club's history and had a change in the dugout for the first time in more than a decade, but it was still quite a comedown from our previous two seasons at this level. Still, it was nice to know early on which division we'd be in for the following campaign...
The big talking point is the fact we're starting a new season without Gareth Ainsworth. It's very strange.
Fans think our owner has a tendency to over-promise, and Rob Couhig splits opinion more now than when he came in, but the majority back him.
Our key player will be goalkeeper Max Stryjek [below]. 'The Polecat' has been a sensation between the sticks so far, and I get the feeling we'll be under the cosh a lot more this year.
Look out for teenager Christie Ward, who's already had some rave reviews, although we don't have a large youth contingent due to being one of the few clubs in the 92 without an academy.
I won't be happy unless we go on an exciting FA Cup run and get to host one of the Premier League big boys – it's been too long!
The pantomime villain will be Bolton manager Ian Evatt. On last season's evidence, he's extremely easy to wind up by doing... nothing at all.
The opposition player I'd love here is Alfie May. If he loves having a blinder at Adams Park so much [scoring four goals there in 2022 and another one last term], he might as well do it for us.
The active player I'd love to have back is Eberechi Eze. Given the heights he's reached since his loan spell with us, he's the best player we've ever had.
The thing my club really gets right is its video and audio content – shoutout to Phil Catchpole, presenter and match commentator extraordinaire.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that we're still learning what he's made of as a manager. Matt Bloomfield [above] spent virtually his whole playing career here and is 'Mr Wycombe', but the jury is still out on him as a gaffer.
If he left, he should be replaced by Mr Blobby. Embrace the chaos.
We'll finish 15th.



FFT VERDICT 10TH

A season of transition? Perhaps – new boss Bloomfield has a different style to Ainsworth, which will take time to implement. Nonetheless, the Chairboys will feel they can push for the play-offs once again if they add wisely to a strong core. They certainly have the know-how.

LEAGUE TWO

/ 2023-24

Good luck to anyone trying to get promoted out of the fourth tier this season – with several clubs investing and Ryan and Rob's Wrexham joining the party, the battle to reach League One could prove intense

There can be absolutely no doubt about it: League Two just got a whole lot stronger.

What Leyton Orient, Stevenage, Northampton and Carlisle achieved last season was phenomenal, for different reasons, and other good sides missed out, yet the standard of football at the top has slipped, incrementally, since 2019-20.

That could change this year, because Wrexham – owned by Hollywood stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, and managed by Phil Parkinson – and Notts County come up having amassed three-digit points tallies in the National League, and will massively enhance the division.

The same could be said for MK Dons and Forest Green – relegated from League One – who have spent big to back up their ambitions of an instant return, recruiting midfielder Alex Gilbey and defender Ryan Inniss respectively, to offer the bite they missed last year. In Inniss' case – sent off four times for Charlton – he possibly had a little too much bite last season.







Also coming back down are Lancashire adversaries Morecambe and Accrington Stanley, both aiming to overcome budgetary limitations under the manager who took them up last time, Derek Adams and John Coleman. Doubt them at your peril.

On top of the new teams, there are some sides who were in League Two last season who are different propositions now compared with 12 months ago.

Take Gillingham, for example: they look revitalised under the ownership of American Brad Galinson, and will be expected to build on excellent form in the second half of 2022-23 after another splashing of cash this summer. Colchester, too, benefited from fresh investment in January and have an incredibly talented group, working under a progressive coach in Ben Garner, who led Swindon to the play-offs at this level in 2021-22.

Doncaster, meanwhile, have increased their budget to lure Grant McCann back for a second stint – he guided the club to the 2019 League One play-offs.

The bar is raised, then, for last season's defeated play-off trio: Stockport have the resources to deliver Dave Challinor's seventh promotion as a manager, and first in the EFL, Mark Hughes' Bradford have tied talisman Andy Cook down to a new deal, and Salford have an astute coach in Neil Wood.

The threats come from far and wide, so even usual suspects Mansfield and Swindon are left to rethink

WHO WILL WIN THE LEAGUE?



WREXHAM



STOCKPORT



NOTTS COUNTY



GILLINGHAM



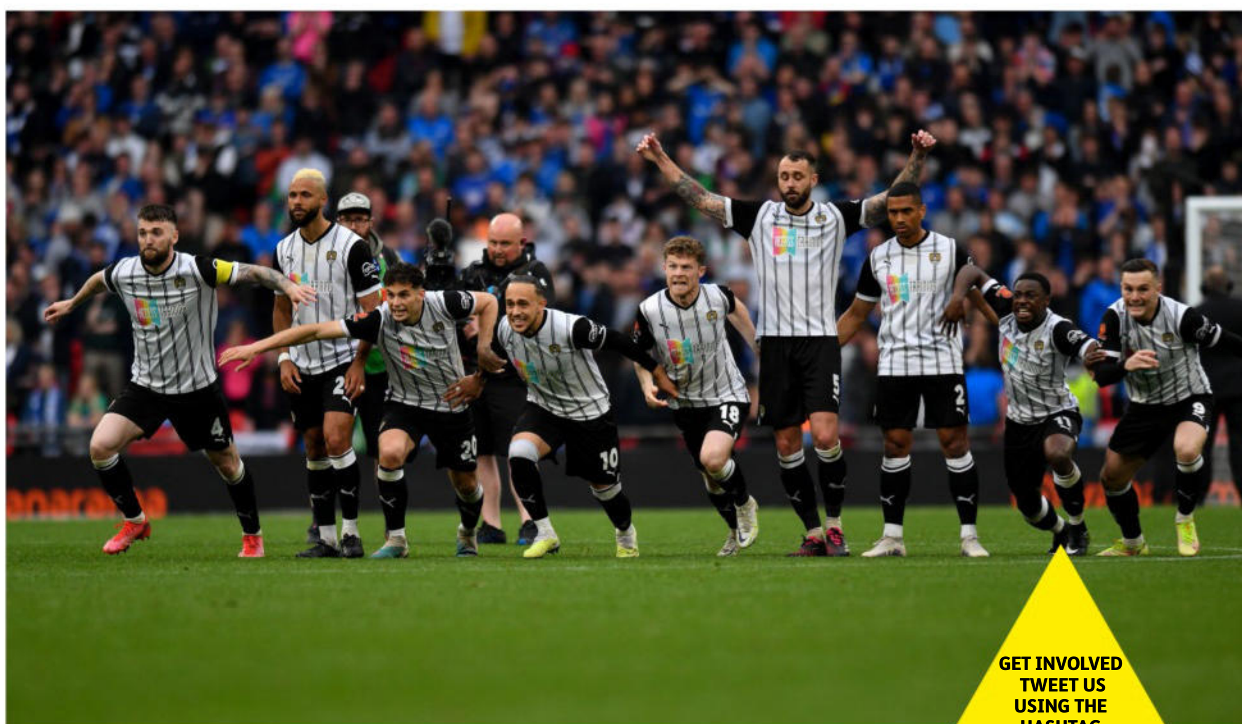
BRADFORD



MANSFIELD

FourFourTwo PREDICTION

1 Stockport
2 Wrexham
3 Notts County
4 Gillingham
5 Doncaster
6 Salford
7 MK Dons
8 Bradford
9 Mansfield
10 Swindon
11 Barrow
12 Grimsby
13 Accrington
14 Forest Green
15 Colchester
16 Tranmere
17 Wimbledon
18 Walsall
19 Crewe
20 Morecambe
21 Newport
22 Harrogate
23 Sutton
24 Crawley



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their respective squads' age profiles: the former edge towards a younger look, while the latter have tweaked their model to hire manager Michael Flynn, who likes his older heads.

Harrogate and Sutton are the underdogs, although the former did push the boat out to recruit defender Rod McDonald. Each have stability on their side, under long-serving managers Simon Weaver and Matt Gray. The duo intend to upset the odds once more, likewise Pete Wild's Barrow, who stylistically mirror their lively, energetic boss.

Elsewhere in the north west, internally appointed Lee Bell and Ian Dawes plot progress at Crewe and Tranmere, after both finished mid-table last term. In Sussex, Crawley's crypto owners need to curb the wackiness and give Scott Lindsey the space to build, after keeping them up last season.

Grimsby weren't far off being ready to push for the play-offs, as their run to the FA Cup quarter-finals showed, and they've since made a statement signing in Danny Rose (no, not that one). Watch out for the 5ft 8in former Stevenage striker's leap.

Newport performed as a top-10 outfit after Graham Coughlan's October arrival and aim to continue that form, while Walsall and Wimbledon feel progress off the pitch should now be backed up on it – gaffers Mat Sadler and Johnnie Jackson are out to prove a point.

League Two will be incredibly competitive – come for the Hollywood stars, stay for the fun elsewhere.

Gabriel Sutton

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

01 Which teenage Colchester defender was named League Two Young Player of the Season in 2022-23?

02 Which of these ex-Manchester United players does not have a share in Salford City (below): David Beckham, Paul Scholes or Robbie Savage?



03 What's the name of newcomers Wrexham's home ground?

04 Who scored four goals for Swindon against Rochdale last term, but still didn't finish on the winning side as the game ended 4-4?

05 Which is the biggest stadium in League Two this campaign?

06 How many fourth-tier outfits this season are situated within Greater London?

07 Which current League Two side were founded before the Football Association existed?

08 For which British Overseas Territory is Walsall captain Donervon Daniels an international: Gibraltar, Bermuda or Montserrat?

09 Which former Premier League referee is a regular in the stands at Tranmere?

10 Whose saved penalty for Stockport eventually meant defeat in last year's play-off final?

1. Junior Tchamadeu **2.** Robbie Savage **3.** Racecourse Ground **4.** Charlie Austin **5.** Stadium MK (MK Dons) **6.** Two (AFC Wimbledon, Sutton United) **7.** Notts County **8.** Montserrat **9.** Mike Dean **10.** Ryan Rydel



ACCRINGTON STANLEY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 23rd **FA CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)** Tommy Leigh (12)

FAN FILE

ADAM SCARBOROUGH

Last season was very disappointing to suffer our first relegation since 1999, but five years in League One for a club of our size was a great achievement.
The big talking point is which of our best players we'll hold on to. Rinse and repeat for Stanley fans.
This season will be different because surely we can't have as many injuries and suspensions as last year. We had 19 out at one point!
I won't be happy unless we make the Wham Stadium a fortress again, after just six league home wins last season.
Our most underrated player is club captain Seamus Conneely. We miss his influence when he's not playing.
Look out for local lad Connor O'Brien, a 19-year-old defender who broke into the first team at the end of last term.
I'm least looking forward to Barrow away, which is bound to be on a cold Tuesday night. [Close, it's a Friday – Ed.]
The opposition player who grinds my gears is our former loanee goalkeeper James Trafford, after a collision in the EFL Trophy semi-final against Bolton which left our midfielder Liam Coyle's cheekbone fractured in four places.
The active player I'd love to have back is Jordan Clark, if he fancies swapping top-flight Luton for us...
The pantomime villain will be our own Sean McConville [above], who has been known to wind the opposition up!
The thing my club really gets right is going out of their way to improve the matchday experience, so fans spend more time at the ground. We have drinks offers and live music to enjoy.
The one change I'd make would be to put a roof on the away end.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is mostly positive. John Coleman [below] got some stick as we went down, but he's been honest about mistakes made last summer regarding recruitment. He's guided us to four promotions and deserves the chance to put things right.
If he left, he should be replaced by someone who understands the club and has Coleman's rapport with the fans. Perhaps Leam Richardson to return after doing well at Wigan? But most of us would like Coleman to stay.
We'll finish 7th. A good end-of-season run will sneak us into the play-offs...



FFT VERDICT 13TH

Everest results with a Mariana Trench budget was never going to last forever, and Stanley suffered their first relegation of Coleman's 22 seasons in charge. This rebuild looks tricky – with a bloated squad it's been hard to recruit, but skipper Conneely's new deal is a positive.



BARROW



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 9th **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Josh Gordon (15)

FAN FILE

DANIEL COOPER
@Dannyowen98

Last season was beyond our Wild-est dreams. At the start, we just wanted mid-table mediocrity; by the end, we were a bit frustrated that we couldn't push into the play-offs.
This season will be different because we've lost some crucial players in Josh Gordon, Patrick Brough and Josh Kay. The most important thing now is how they are replaced.
Our most underrated player is Niall Canavan. Our captain at the back often doesn't get the credit he deserves.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Pete Wild is incredible. We had to get our appointment spot on last summer after ploughing through David Dunn, Michael Jolley, Mark Cooper and Phil Brown in two seasons since returning to the EFL. Although there's work to be done on his tactical approaches to some matches, we couldn't be happier with him overall.
If he left, he should be replaced by Boreham Wood's Luke Garrard.
The pantomime villain will be Andy Cook at Bradford. He was a Barrow fan favourite in the National League North and National League, but as much as there is mutual respect between him and our fans, he loves winding us up and we enjoy giving it back.
I'm least looking forward to facing Harrogate, who tend to bully us out of the game.
Our key player will be Ben Whitfield [below] – 12 assists last time out, and pivotal to our good early-season form. With some bigger targets in the centre, he could even improve those numbers.
Look out for new signing Kian Spence, another Halifax player linking up with Wild again here. He's tidy in possession and offers a threat in the final third.
The one change I'd make would be to implement a points-based ticketing system. If we get a big cup draw – at home or away – then we'll have more fans wanting tickets, and it shouldn't be on a first-come-first-served basis.
I won't be happy unless we attempt to kick on from last term and towards the play-off spots. Standing still is the fastest way to move backwards, and if we look for mid-table then we could be dragged towards the bottom.
We'll finish 10th.



FFT VERDICT 11TH

The Bluebirds impressed with their high-octane style last season, but missed out on the play-offs. Now David Worrall has joined to offer extra creativity and Dean Campbell some youthful Scottish brio, they could get stronger under talented boss Wild. But so could the league...



BRADFORD CITY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 6th **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Andy Cook (31)

FAN FILE
JASON McKEOWN

Last season was a big improvement but ultimately very disappointing, with a play-off semi-final defeat to Carlisle. It felt like a missed opportunity: the squad looked capable of reaching the automatic promotion places, but every time the team got close to contention, they couldn't take that next giant step.
I won't be happy unless we finish in the play-off berths. With Mark Hughes [above] in the final year of his contract, a top-seven spot has to be the goal, even if League Two looks tougher this season due to big money backing the promoted clubs and sides such as Gillingham getting financially stronger.
Our key player will be Andy Cook. We feared that we'd lose him following his 31-goal haul, but instead he's signed a new three-year contract. Last season, Cook scored or assisted more than half of our league goals. He's vital.
Look out for Bobby Pointon, 19. He's attracted glowing praise, from Hughes included, after successful loan spells.



Our most underrated player is Brad Halliday, a decent, solid right-back who lets nobody down.
The active player I'd love to have back is Elliot Watt of Salford. We lost him last summer after he'd shown very good form under Hughes, then he had an excellent campaign at Salford.
The pantomime villain will be Jonny Williams, for sure! The Welsh midfielder will be an unpopular visitor to Valley Parade, after he was about to sign for us this summer but changed his mind at the last minute. He was apparently sitting in a hotel, paid for by Bradford, when he made the U-turn and moved to Gillingham instead.
The thing my club really gets right is cheap season tickets, in a city with a lot of economic and social problems.
The one change I'd make would be to buy back Valley Parade. We pay an awful lot in rent each year, and that's money that could be invested into the team and our infrastructure.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he must be less cautious at times. He's done plenty of good, and tries to play good football, but his management of the play-offs has hurt his standing with the fans. He got some big calls wrong.
We'll finish 7th.

FFT VERDICT — 8TH

Tying down top goalscorer Cook was great business, but it's a top-heavy squad that was carried at times last year by a handful of star individuals. They must forget the play-off semi-final defeat quickly, with midfielders Kevin McDonald and Alex Pattison snapped up.



COLCHESTER UNITED



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 20th **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Noah Chilvers (9)

FAN FILE
JAMIE WOOLER
@WoolerJamie

Last season was quite the mixed bag. But expectations were low: the main aim, with an aged and bloated squad, was just to ensure we stayed in the league ahead of a rebuild this summer.
The big talking point is still boss Matt Bloomfield leaving for Wycombe in February, after Colchester gave him his first managerial job last September. It was gutting to lose Ossama Ashley to Salford. He'd made the position at the base of Colchester's midfield his own. Keeping our best players is a struggle.
This season will be different because Ben Garner became our manager in March with a new, possession-based style. The early signs were encouraging, considering he had a squad that had been built for a more direct approach. I expect we'll now recruit players who are more comfortable in possession.
Look out for Samson Tovide. The teen ace is a handful for defenders.
The pantomime villain will be owner Robbie Cowling, as always.



Fans think our owner is a bit of an idiot. For the past decade or so, most managerial appointments have come from within, and while continuity is fine in a successful team, we've been on a slow decline for 15 years and there's been a reluctance to alter too much at the club. However, that does appear to have changed, with some external appointments in the previous couple of years bringing fresh ideas.
The thing my club really gets right is giving opportunities to young players. A number of lads came through our academy who are now playing higher up the pyramid, including Sammie Szmodics at Blackburn and Frankie Kent at Peterborough. Now it's the turn of Junior Tchamadeu and Noah Chilvers to attract multiple suitors.
Our key player will be Connor Hall [below] – there aren't many better ball-playing defenders in League Two – or possibly Matt Jay, assuming Chilvers goes. Jay started slowly after joining from Exeter in January, but his record in this division speaks for itself.
We'll finish 12th. Some fans won't agree but I believe a top-half finish would be decent, even if the owner says we have a top-seven budget. It's going to be so competitive at the top.

FFT VERDICT — 15TH

With fresh investment, an exciting, young crop and a talented coach in Garner, progress is likely. How much depends on whether Chilvers and Tchamadeu can be replaced if they leave, with Ashley already departed. Ellis Iandolo has added valuable experience from Swindon.



CRAWLEY TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 22nd **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP Third Round **TOP SCORER** Dom Telford (15)

FAN FILE

SAM JORDAN
@SamJordan87

Last season was a battle. An expected promotion push (hype from the new owners) ended in us nearly exiting the division at the wrong end.
The big talking point is when will our crypto bro owners engage with fans and will they invest in the squad?
I won't be happy unless our co-chairmen Preston Johnson and Eben Smith stand down and allow someone who knows what they're doing to lead our club. Otherwise, it's another fight against relegation.
Our key player will be Dion Conroy. After returning from a long layoff last season, the defender played a big part in us staying up.
Look out for 20-year-old midfielder Raf Khaleel who impressed when coming off the bench last season. Recently signed a two-year contract and has some real talent.
The opposition player I'd love here is Will Collar. A local lad who has impressed at Stockport.
The opposition players who grind my gears are Glenn Morris and Tom Nichols, who joined relegation rivals Gillingham and went on to prove why we shouldn't have let them go. I wish them all the best with a broken heart.
The active player I'd love to have back is Max Watters. We missed a goalscorer last season and he had six superb months with us in 2020.
The pantomime villain will be co-chairman Johnson. He sat in the dugout at Stevenage in December, so don't put anything past him.
The thing my club really gets right is season ticket prices. Reduced by 34 per cent last season and frozen again.
I'm least looking forward to playing anyone away. With only two away wins last season, that has to improve.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is good. Scott Lindsey [below] kept us up after his January arrival and the way he interacts with fans is appreciated.
If he left, he should be replaced by someone with Football League experience, but after three managers last season – including the 32-day reign of Matthew Etherington – we don't want any more changes.
We'll finish bottom half. Getting 50 points as soon as possible is the aim.



FFT VERDICT 24TH

Crawley got attention last season for eccentricity off the field, rather than electricity on it – something the crypto-owners have to change. Last term's separate runs of four, three and six straight losses hardly scream stability. They'll hope Danilo Orsi adds quality from Grimsby.



CREWE ALEXANDRA



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 13th **FA CUP** Second Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Dan Agyei (16)

FAN FILE

STEVE BENNETT
@sargeantbennett

Last season was just about what we expected, on the whole: mediocre in parts but with a good finish. Stability was key, and we achieved that.
The big talking point is how the club replace departed top scorer Dan Agyei and defender Rod McDonald. The new crop of youngsters need a couple of old heads to help them along.
Our key player will be Chris Long, who's a good goalscorer – arguably too good for this level.
Our most underrated player is Charlie Finney [below] – a name to watch. He'd have been more prominent last season but for injuries. He is technically gifted and can play in a variety of positions.
The opposition player I'd love here is Luke Bolton from Salford. He's greased lightning and gave us a torrid time at Gresty Road last season.
The thing my club really gets right is giving under-11s free season tickets when bought with an adult ticket. Get 'em hooked early!
The one change I'd make would be matchday pricing for this season or commercial awareness. It's improved in recent years, but sometimes we still score own goals in that department.
Fans think our owner splits opinions. There are mixed views on our ownership consortium. The chairman [Charles Grant] gets a lot of stick as we only see him when we've won a few games or if he's after season-ticket sales. He goes missing at other times...
The player I'd happily drive to another club is goalkeeper Dave Richards. Sadly, he just isn't good enough. Our first signing this summer was teenage keeper Harvey Davies, on loan from Liverpool.
Look out for 18-year-old Matus Holicek, our local lad of Slovakian heritage. He is properly gifted.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Lee Bell [above] is learning as he goes. He improved as last season went on.
If he left, he should be replaced by someone from outside. We've had too many similar voices for too long.
The pantomime villains will be Wrexham. I'm already bored of Disney FC and the season hasn't even started.
We'll finish 12th. Another season of mediocrity awaits!



FFT VERDICT 19TH

Crewe stopped the rot last season, after relegation in 2021-22, but they've lost key players including McDonald and Agyei. England Under-20s goalkeeper Davies could impress on loan, but it'll be tough to match last year's levels. Ryan Cooney adds a bit of know-how.



DONCASTER ROVERS



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 18th **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** George Miller (13)

FAN FILE

ROB JOHNSON
@RobSceneblog

Last season was an utter shambles. Just like the season before that and the one before that.
The big talking point is the promise of a 'significant' investment from owner Terry Bramall. Six new signings by mid-June, including Cambridge striker Joe Ironside, is a great start.
This season will be different because Grant McCann is back! We were just a shootout away from the League One play-off final in his previous spell.
I won't be happy unless we do something about the laughably awful food served on the concourse.
Our key player will be Richard Wood. Experience of playing at a higher level. Even at 38, he's an exciting signing.
Our most underrated player is George Miller [below]. Last season's top scorer is unfairly maligned by a large section of our fanbase.
Look out for 18-year-old forward Jack Goodman, who scored loads for the youth team and looks impressive.



Fans think our owner is tight. Fans have started referring to the club as 'Netto FC' – after the defunct discount store – due to the lack of investment.
The opposition player I'd love here is David McGoldrick, having signed for Notts County. The standard of player we can only dream of attracting.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Omar Bogle. Terrible for us, then became Newport's top scorer.
The active player I'd love to have back is Billy Sharp. We got all dewy-eyed at the prospect of a reunion.
The pantomime villain will be chairman David Blunt, who will come in for criticism if we aren't at least flirting with the play-offs.
The thing my club really gets right is drama. There's always something going off, none of it good in recent years. We're due a bit of sunshine.
I'm least looking forward to playing MK Dons. Shouldn't exist.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is very good after his last spell. His stock couldn't be higher.
If he left, he should be replaced by anyone but Darren Ferguson. We don't want to become associated with the Peterborough United merry-go-round.
We'll finish 9th.

FFT VERDICT 5TH

Donny prepared for this season showing greater intent than last, with the statement reappointment of McCann, plus standout signings including right-back Jamie Sterry and frontman Ironside. It appears a Rovers return to League One could be in the offing this term...



FOREST GREEN ROVERS



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 24th **FA CUP** Third Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Connor Wickham (9)

FAN FILE

CHRIS LATHAM
@achrislatham

Last season was hard to watch. Relegation was always possible, but we should have been more competitive.
The big question is whether we have learned the lessons from last season to make us better in the longer term.
This season will be different because we have a new director of football, Allan Steele. He reminds me a bit of Rob Edwards – very personable, knowledgeable and passionate – so let's hope that he helps to bring us the same success.
Our key player will be Ryan Inniss. Duncan Ferguson's first signing of the summer very much fits the Ferguson mould and will add some much-needed fight at the back.
Our most underrated player is the versatile Kyle McAllister [below], who improved a lot throughout last season.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is David Davis. He is one of our better-paid players but hasn't made the impact we'd hoped for.



The thing my club really gets right is its ambassador programme with local schools, bringing through a new generation of fans.
The one change I'd make would be for the club to invest more in its women's team.
Look out for 20-year-old midfielder Harvey Bunker – he did break through into the team towards the end of last season but I think the academy graduate will make a starting place his own in 2023-24.
The active player I'd love to have back is Christian Doidge, if you ask my heart. My head says Ethan Pinnock.
I'm least looking forward to playing Mansfield. I don't know why.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that while he underperformed statistically when compared to Ian Burchnall, who had preceded him last term, Ferguson [above] should be given time and a chance to build his own team.
If he left, he should be replaced by Jimmy Ball – son of World Cup winner Alan – who did wonders as Forest Green's caretaker manager a couple of years ago and has since had success at non-league AFC Totton.
We'll finish 12th – I'd take that now, although the play-offs would be nice.

FFT VERDICT 14TH

A soft touch in League One last season, Forest Green are planning their rebuild around athleticism and physicality: signing defender Inniss and ex-Crawley loanee Teddy Jenks should help Ferguson's side become tougher customers, but that losing feeling is hard to shake.



GILLINGHAM



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 17th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Fourth Round **TOP SCORER** Tom Nichols (6)

FAN FILE

DANNY SMITH
@QuietNiceMarker

Last season was pretty wild. We went from scoring just seven goals in the first half of the season to being one of the form teams in the second. The on-field investment from Brad Galinson [below], the new owner, transformed the club and built the foundation for optimism about the 2023-24 campaign.
Fans think our owner is the greatest living American, possibly? It's hard to overstate the impact he's had since January. Following our increasingly fractious relationship with the previous owner, 2023 has been a breath of fresh air – it can't last forever but this honeymoon period is a rare treat.
The one change I'd make would be to finally commit to building a new stadium or replace the 'temporary' stand that's been there for 20 years.
Our key player will be Timothee Dieng, who should be playing at a far higher level – I just hope it will be with us. His work rate, quality on the ball and infectious enthusiasm stand out.



I'm least looking forward to playing Wrexham – I think it's a mostly positive story, but the circus that follows them around could become frustrating for the rest of the clubs in League Two.
The opposition player I'd love here is Paul Mullin. I imagine he'll carry on scoring in League Two.
The active player I'd love to have back is Bradley Dack, any time he fancies dropping a couple of levels.
The thing my club really gets right is engagement with the fanbase under the new regime. It's really worked, from social media to ticket price offers.
The pantomime villain will be all of Swindon. That's the closest we have to an enemy in this division, regardless of their apathy towards us.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's a bit too defensive, especially away from home. Neil Harris has earned the right to give it a go with this squad and he is well-liked on the whole, but expectations will be high and a good start is essential.
I won't be happy unless we make the play-offs. Automatic promotion will be tough in a competitive league, but we are set up for a top-seven challenge.
We'll finish in the play-offs. It's the best way to go up!

FFT VERDICT — 4TH

Two wins and seven goals in the first 23 games of last season, 12 and 29, the second: no coincidence those returns sandwiched the Galinsons' takeover. The arrival of Wales midfielder Jonny Williams, fresh from 10 Swindon goals last term, adds to the drastic progress.



GRIMSBY TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 11th **FA CUP** Quarter-Final **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Harry Clifton, Gavan Holohan (9)

FAN FILE

THOMAS SARGENT
@nousrembobinons

Last season was pretty amazing. A consolidating 11th in the league was decent, but mainly because: FA Cup quarter-finalists, Grimsby Town.
The big talking point is whether we'll go on and win the Cup this year? We beat past and future top-flight sides Southampton and Luton to get there...
This season will be different because we almost certainly won't get to the FA Cup quarter-finals. Elsewhere, early signings Toby Mullarkey from Rochdale and Bradford's Abo Eisa, signed for a third time by Paul Hurst, bode well for 2023-24. It's just a shame New Zealand goalkeeper Max Crocombe, who appeared in every game last term despite frequent bouts of time-wasting 'cramps', decided not to accept the club's offer of a new deal.
I won't be happy unless we win the FA Cup. [That's enough now – Ed.]
Our key player will be Evan Khouri [below]. The ex-West Ham youngster will build on last season's 22 run-outs and make a big impression in what could be his breakout season.



The opposition player who grinds my gears is AFC Wimbledon's Harry Pell. Pure bitterness fuels our dislike of our former loanee, who seems to enjoy it.
The active player I'd love to have back is Andy Cook, given his scoring record last season – 28 in the league fired Bradford into the play-offs.
The pantomime villain will be Phil Parkinson – a total whinge-bag.
The thing my club really gets right is the (Lincolnshire sausage) hot dogs. Absolutely delicious.
The one change I'd make would be converting the lower sections of our three home stands at Blundell Park into safe-standing paddocks.
I'm least looking forward to playing Newport away – we rarely win there.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's Grimsby's Marmite. But people need a reality check: in our first season back in League Two, we were easily safe and only went out of the two big cups to Premier League opposition.
If he left, he should be replaced by Darren Sarll, who's doing a good job with Woking in the National League.
We'll finish 3rd. All aboard the promotion train to Cleethorpes.

FFT VERDICT — 12TH

After overseeing the Mariners' best FA Cup run in 84 years, Paul Hurst needs to convert the underdog template into one that will give them the consistency to challenge, which requires different strengths. Former Stevenage striker Danny Rose is a superb signing, though.



HARROGATE TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 19th **FA CUP** Second Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Luke Armstrong (16)

FAN FILE

KATHERINE SWINN
@katherine_swinn

Last season was up and down. We had a really poor start but January signings, including almost an entirely new defence, meant we survived comfortably enough. We need to be more positive, especially at home.
The big talking point is whether new centre-back Rod McDonald can match the transformative form of Anthony O'Connor [above] – but he's got great pedigree and was Crewe's player of the year. Left-back Matty Foulds joining permanently is also a boost. A team has to be built from the back.
Our key player will be striker Luke Armstrong [below]. Without our main man's 16 goals and six assists we'd have been relegated. He started every game, always gives 100 per cent and works so hard off the ball. Key for defensive set-pieces, too.
Look out for local lad George Horbury. The promising 19-year-old midfielder became our first academy graduate 12 months ago.
Fans think our owner has generally done a fantastic job. Irving Weaver has backed manager/son Simon and made significant improvements off the pitch to go with what will be our fourth season in League Two.
The opposition player I'd love here is Salford's Luke Bolton. A pacy winger who scores and creates goals.
The active player I'd love to have back is James Belshaw, now of Bristol Rovers. A fantastic keeper who played an enormous part in our rise to the EFL.
The one change I'd make would be the return of our traditional yellow-and-black stripes to the home shirt.
I'm least looking forward to playing Salford. We never seem to beat them, dating back to non-league.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is mixed. Now in charge for 14 years – the best period in our history – Weaver deserves plenty of praise, but his stubbornness, poor man management, tactical deficiencies and loyalty to certain players have caused concern. His father might be the chairman, but he's still answerable to us fans.
If he left, he should be replaced by lower-league legend Neil Warnock.
We'll finish higher than last season. 11th or 12th.



FFT VERDICT 22ND

After starting life in the EFL with 17th-, then a pair of 19th-placed finishes, Harrogate target further progress following a decent start to the window. Kazeem Olaigbe, Tom Eastman and Alex Pattison will be missed, though, and League Two just keeps getting stronger.



MANSFIELD TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 8th **FA CUP** Second Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Will Swan (10)

FAN FILE

SAM BINCH
@MTFCMusings

Last season was agonising. To miss out on the play-offs by one goal was bitterly disappointing.
The big talking point is that we're signing defenders who can actually defend, like Bristol Rovers' Alfie Kilgour [above] in January. For too long we had to do with makeshift options and it showed in the goals against column.
This season will be different because we hopefully won't suffer an injury crisis like last term. At Bradford in February we had three players taken off injured before half-time!
I won't be happy unless we finish in the play-offs. No excuse this season.
Our key player will be centre-back Kilgour. An instant hit, he tackled anything that moved and headed everything in the air. What we needed.
Our most underrated player is George Maris, a dependable regular who makes the midfield tick.
Look out for James Gale, 21, who got his first-team chance due to injuries and scored three goals in four games at the end of last term.
Fans think our owner is God. John Radford has pumped so much money in and seen very little reward for it.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Bradford's Andy Cook: bang average for us but has banged them in everywhere else. Especially against us.
The opposition player I'd love here is David McGoldrick. He could make a mockery of League Two next season.
The active player I'd love to have back is Tyler Walker, most recently of Coventry. He was brilliant on loan in 2018-19 and would excel in this team.
The pantomime villain will be Ollie Palmer, returning with Wrexham. Had some choice words to say when he left that will mark him out for some stick.
The one change I'd make would be to knock down the Bishop Street Stand and replace it. It's an eyesore.
I'm least looking forward to playing Sutton – we never beat them and they're awful to watch.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's popular, but the pressure is on Nigel Clough [below] to deliver this season – which is why he's not been given longer than a one-year deal.
We'll finish 6th.



FFT VERDICT 9TH

League Two's bridesmaids have had four promotion challenges in the past six seasons thanks to the Radfords' investment, without success. The Stags need defender Baily Cargill, who has arrived from Forest Green, fit if they're to wear the white dress this time around.



MILTON KEYNES DONS



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 21st **FA CUP** Second Round **LEAGUE CUP** Fourth Round **TOP SCORER** Mo Eisa (above, 14)

FAN FILE

JOZEF CHAPMAN
@JozefChapman92

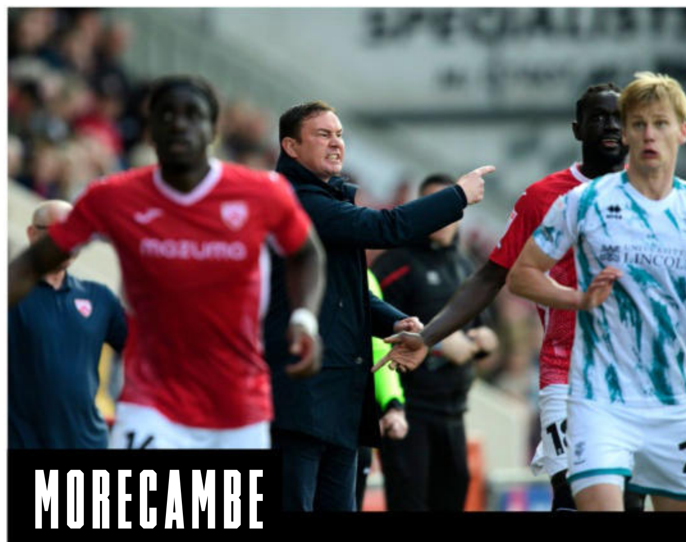
Last season was abysmal. After the (almost) highs of 2021-22, I don't think anyone predicted relegation.
The big talking point is after last summer's disappointing recruitment, can sporting director Liam Sweeting, incoming manager Graham Alexander and the scouting team work together to bounce straight back up to League One? Newport right-back Cam Norman was an early bit of business.
This season will be different because promotion aspirations are now a must, rather than a want.
Our key player will be Mo Eisa, if we keep hold of him. The 29-year-old forward could run riot in League Two.
Our most underrated player is Conor Grant [below]. Solid midfielder and still young enough to improve.
Look out for Joel Anker. Size may be an issue here but I'd love to see the 18-year-old forward, who's just signed a first professional deal, around the first team next season.



Fans think our owner is on his last legs. With Premier League promises 10 years ago, and the club stagnating, it's time for a new man at the top.
The active player I'd love to have back is George Williams, recently released by Cambridge. We've already re-signed midfielder Alex Gilbey from Charlton this summer, and he's the only other ex-Don I'd want back.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Nathan Holland. He's not been a good bit of business.
The pantomime villain will be the legend Dean Lewington, who always gets a fun reception at AFC Wimbledon. Ben Foster and his GoPro will get some abuse this season too.
The one change I'd make would be to get the proposed training ground at the National Bowl Development up and running. It was announced in 2019.
I'm least looking forward to playing AFC Wimbledon. Towards the end of the 2021-22 season, I thought it'd be a while until we were back in SW17 again – that feels like a long time ago.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Alexander is a good appointment, with a decent pedigree.
We'll finish 6th, followed by play-off semi-final defeat for the sixth time.

FFT VERDICT — 7TH

Last time MK Dons dropped down to League Two, they appointed an experienced manager and made a statement signing early in the window, winning promotion at the first attempt in 2018-19. It's the same again this time, with Gilbey returning to the fold. Same result?



MORECAMBE



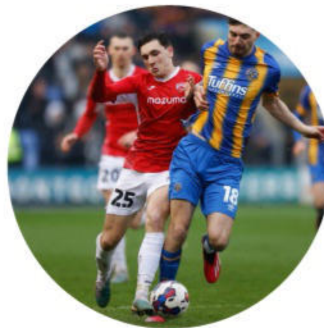
LAST SEASON

LEAGUE ONE 22nd **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** Third Round **TOP SCORER** Cole Stockton (12)

FAN FILE

DARREN CLIFFORD
@cllrdclifford

Last season was the first in our history in which we were relegated. But we fought to the end.
This season will be different because we'll get to meet Ryan Reynolds.
The big talking point is who is going to take over the club... eventually.
The pantomime villain will be one of Jason Whittingham [selling owner yet to find a buyer after nine months] or Sarbjot Johal [20-year-old prospective owner yet to offer proof of funds to the EFL after nine months], who are in a fight to the death on that one.
I won't be happy unless we have a new, responsible, decent and moderately interested owner.
Our key player will be anyone decent we sign, maybe Yann Songo'o, part of our 2020-21 play-off winners. This is the fifth time Derek Adams has signed the experienced centre-back. I'll take anybody who can kick a ball.
Look out for 19-year-old Adam Mayor [below], if we can keep him. He was fantastic at League One level, so he should smash it this season.



The active player I'd love to have back is Connor Ripley, our Port Vale-bound goalkeeper last season. He was magnificent on and off the pitch and should be playing at a much higher level than League One.
The thing my club really gets right is corporate hospitality. They win lots of awards – so much so they've even got their own trophy cabinet.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that while he does play what some people call negative football, he's a pragmatist who gets results, plus he's a decent, thoughtful man. Adams [above] is a fantastic motivator and sports psychologist, and he fought last term with one hand tied behind his back.
If he left, he should be replaced by anybody who would even agree to join Morecambe in our present situation. Even Ted Lasso would probably walk the other way.
I'm least looking forward to playing Gillingham. The town and the ground have no redeeming features – even compared to Barrow, it's bad.
We'll finish in the bottom half, but then stabilise thanks to the hard work on and off the pitch and rise again.

FFT VERDICT — 20TH

Though Morecambe are well-run day-to-day, ownership concerns dominate. Relegation hasn't made things easy for Adams, for whom survival looks a more realistic aim rather than a repeat of 2020-21's historic promotion, especially given the massive turnover of players.



NEWPORT COUNTY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 15th **FA CUP** Second Round **LEAGUE CUP** Third Round **TOP SCORER** Omar Bogle (above, 19)

FAN FILE
JAMIE HARRIS
@1912Exiles

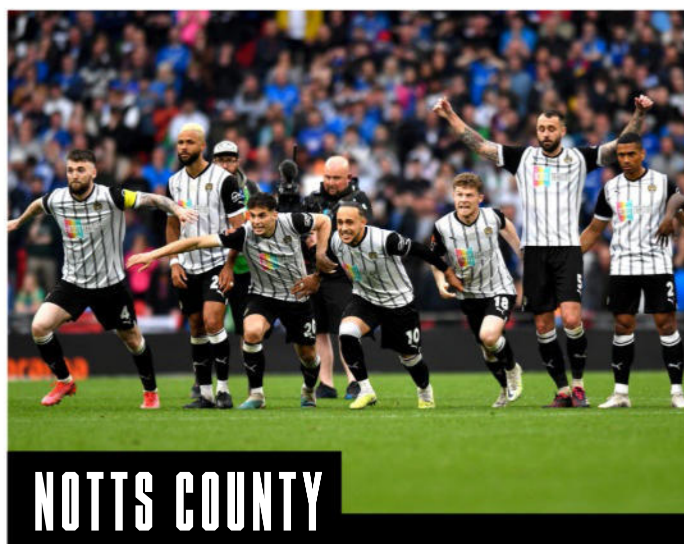
Last season was down and up, in that order. In October, we replaced boss James Rowberry, who had a game plan that wasn't working, with Graham Coughlan [below]. His pragmatic style worked, even putting us mid-table.
The big talking point is how we will replace our big guns, such as Cam Norman and Priestley Farquharson, who's joined Walsall. Hopefully we get lucky in the loan market – borrowed England Under-18 international Matty Bondswell from Newcastle has some promise. Bryn Morris brings plenty of experience from Grimsby, while Kyle Jameson has joined from Tranmere.
Our key player will be Omar Bogle. He got plenty of stick but ended the season strongly with 19 goals overall.
Fans think our owners are lax with communication. As a Supporters' Trust, we operate on a shoestring budget and, while our board of directors volunteer their time to run the club, more transparency is needed.



The opposition player I'd love here is Peterborough's David Ajiboye, who was back on loan at Sutton last season. Every time he's played us, it's been a pleasure to watch.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Myles Hippolyte of Stockport – he (and they) tore us apart in April.
The active player I'd love to have back is any one of the exciting young midfielders we've had over the years – Josh Sheehan went to Bolton, and we had Oli Cooper and Finn Azaz on loan from Swansea and Aston Villa.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Mickey Demetriou, who I'd tell I'm driving to Swindon, but really I'm taking a U-turn on the Severn Bridge, returning to Rodney Parade and securing the perimeter.
I'm least looking forward to playing Wrexham. We beat them 10 years ago in the Conference Premier play-off final and they've finally decided to join us in the Football League. But comparing our budgets this year, I fear a drubbing.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that we really like him. He's honest and knows how to make us tricky to beat.
We'll finish 22nd. I'd take survival in basically any form.

FFT VERDICT 21ST

If Newport continue their form since Coughlan's October arrival, they'll be play-off candidates. It might not be that simple, though, with Norman and others leaving, even if attacking midfielder Nathan Wood adjusts after impressing in the Cymru Premier for Penybont.



NOTTS COUNTY



LAST SEASON

NATIONAL LEAGUE 2nd **FA CUP** 4QR **FA TROPHY** Fourth Round **TOP SCORER** Macaulay Langstaff (42)

FAN FILE
PAUL SMITH
@psmithyjourno

Last season was a rollercoaster. We pushed Hollywood FC all season and the gut-wrenching play-off win made four seasons of non-league worth it.
This season will be different because we're not going to Solihull away.
The big talking point is whether we can go again. It feels as though last season was just the start.
Our most underrated player is Sam Austin [below]. He always makes an impact when needed and his minutes-per-goal involvement is right up there.
Our key player will be David McGoldrick. His return was unexpected given he was one of League One's top scorers. With Ruben Rodrigues going, McGoldrick must replace his creativity.
The opposition player I'd love here is Oxford's Rodrigues… too soon? Stockport's Will Collar impresses me.
I'm least looking forward to playing MK Dons. I still despise their existence and their soulless stadium, while our record against them is also appalling.



The pantomime villain will be Nigel Clough. Being Mansfield's manager is enough, but he also has the character and personality to get under the skin… plus his obvious Forest connections.
Fans think our owners are quiet and unassuming. The Reedtz brothers, Chris and Alex, are the perfect antidote to their predecessors.
The thing my club really gets right is its media output. It's of a Premier League standard. The content they put out around the Wembley win was phenomenal.
The one change I'd make would be to move the away fans closer to the hardcore home end – the Kop – for a better atmosphere.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's a hugely likeable character and immensely popular for achieving promotion in his first year. He's in tune with the club and his coaching style is of a much higher standing.
If he left, he should be replaced by his clone? He feels irreplaceable. Luke Williams leaving would be far more catastrophic than any player going.
We'll finish 6th or 7th. I think we'll sneak a play-off spot. And, after last season's drama, we may have the experience to deliver at Wembley…

FFT VERDICT 3RD

The swashbuckling Magpies bagged a whopping 107 National League points and are superbly coached by Williams. McGoldrick's return to Meadow Lane represents League Two's standout capture, while goalkeeper Aidan Stone is a good signing from League One Port Vale.



SALFORD CITY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 7th **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Callum Hendry (below, 14)

FAN FILE

ANDY THURSTON
@BroughtonM7

Last season was a rollercoaster, with a new manager in Neil Wood, a spell in the autumn where we couldn't score, a spell in the spring where we couldn't stop scoring, and a play-off semi-final defeat on penalties to Stockport.
The big talking point is Karen Baird moving on, after 10 years as chairman. She's a true club legend.
This season will be different because we've finally got a scoreboard!
Our most underrated player is Callum Hendry, as he never stops. His work rate is awesome and he isn't one for backing out of a challenge – to his detriment, at times.
The active player I'd love to have back is former Salford loanee Di'Shon Bernard, a fantastic centre-back. He's still only 22 and has just been released by Manchester United...
The thing my club really gets right is listening to the supporters to improve the matchday experience, now that we're staying at Moor Lane.
The one change I'd make would be to improve merchandise and the club shop. We are way behind other clubs.
I won't be happy unless we bring back Grandad's Sausages.
I'm least looking forward to playing Forest Green. The climb up the hill from the boozer to the ground is a killer!
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is positive, but he needs to be ruthless. The football we play is some of the best we've seen for a long while, since our National League North days, but he does love a random substitution and it's like a grassroots coach giving game time to the lad who pays his subs and attends training every week.
Our key player will be Stevie Mallan [above]. He joined at the start of last season and then missed most of it due to injury. When he came into the side for the last third of the campaign, the midfielder's class and experience were obvious to see. He was instrumental in Salford reaching the play-offs.
The pantomime villain will be Josh Falkingham at Harrogate. He plays the fans superbly, the git!
We'll finish in the play-off spots again. There are some big hitters in the league this season, with Wrexham and Notts County joining in.



FFT VERDICT 6TH

Despite achieving a top-seven League Two finish at the fourth attempt, Salford have had to make cutbacks as stalwart Ibou Touray departs, though Luke Garbutt is a decent replacement. Wood must get more out of his resources to oversee another promotion bid.



STOCKPORT COUNTY



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 4th **FA CUP** Third Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Kyle Wootton (14)

FAN FILE

CHLOE DIGBY
@ChloeDigby

Last season was good on balance, but defeat at Wembley was hard to take.
The big talking point is whether we can go up automatically this season. Having a year in the Football League under our belts should help.
Our key player will be striker Kyle Wootton. He suffered a serious injury at a crucial point last season and we really missed him during the run-in.
Look out for 22-year-old wing-back Ryan Rydel [below]. His form was up and down, but he showed what he was really made of in the play-off semi-final second leg against Salford.
The thing my club really gets right is marketing just how exciting it is to be a County fan right now.
The one change I'd make would be to improve the ticket system. It causes so many issues.
The opposition player I'd love here is Carlisle midfielder Owen Moxon – he was a class act when he played against us last season.
Our most underrated player is Ryan Croasdale. To the untrained eye, he could look pretty average, but he plays a key role in our system.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Callum Camps, who wants to stroke the ball around in midfield too much while his team-mates are putting in the hard graft.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is love from the vast majority of supporters, who want to see Dave Challinor carry on his superb work, although there is a small minority of dissenting voices around Edgeley Park.
If he left, he should be replaced by Chris Wilder, though I'm not sure he would drop this far down the leagues.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Salford striker Matt Smith. I've nothing personal against him, but the way that the commentators went on about him in our play-off semi-final – comparing him to Olivier Giroud – was properly embarrassing.
I'm least looking forward to playing Wrexham, purely because of all the unnecessary hype that accompanies them and their owners.
The pantomime villain will be Wrexham's Paul Mullin, undoubtedly.
We'll finish 2nd.



FFT VERDICT 1ST

Challinor's side like to play forward early with quality, then build: it's proven a great template in League Two, and poaching left-back Ibou Touray from Salford will only improve an already deep squad. Ominous for the rest in what looks like being another strong season.



SUTTON UNITED



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 14th **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Omar Bugiel, Will Randall (6)

FAN FILE

ANDREW YOUNGMAN
@andrew_youngers

Last season was largely dull. We had an unfortunate exit in the League Cup, lost at home to sixth-tier Farnborough in the FA Cup, and ended the season winless in 11 games having scored just 46 goals in the league overall.
The big talking point is where to put 1,000 extra seats, which we need to satisfy league ground grading criteria. Luckily we've been given an exemption until next summer.
This season will be different because we're going to have a much-changed side. There'll be a big turnaround, with at least 16 players leaving since May.
I'm least looking forward to playing Forest Green, because it's just a terrible away-day experience. And Walsall and Grimsby are pure meh.
The opposition player I'd love here is Gillingham midfielder Jonny Williams, who was superb at Swindon last term.
Look out for Kylian Kouassi [below], a product of our youth academy. He'll get more playing time this campaign.
Our key player will be Sutton's Captain Fantastic, Craig Eastmond [above], who is closing in on 350 appearances. He's a colussus, and boy do we miss him in midfield when he doesn't play.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Conor Wilkinson, most recently of Walsall, or any of the Grimsby players who went down for an age with cramp during their visit in March.
The thing my club really gets right is responding to fan feedback. A fanzone was created during last season: a great addition to the matchday experience.
The one change I'd make would be to magically make the ground up to league standard. Off-season stadium developments continue to hurt us.
The pantomime villain will be almost any of the referees we have to put up with in the fourth tier. Where do they find these people?
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is still that Matt Gray has god-like status for guiding us into this division. He got us through a tricky second season here, too, and I look forward to seeing how he fares this term.
We'll finish 22nd, at this point in time. I hope there'll be two worse sides than us, but we have a mammoth rebuilding job ahead of us this summer!



FFT VERDICT 23RD

This could be Gray's hardest year, after Ali Smith, Will Randall, Omar Bugiel and Donovan Wilson exited Gander Green Lane. A stable club with a good culture, but resources are tight and the league is much stronger now. Ebbsfleet midfielder Christian N'Guessan should fit in.



SWINDON TOWN



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 10th **FA CUP** First Round **LEAGUE CUP** First Round **TOP SCORER** Jonny Williams (10)

FAN FILE

RICH PULLEN
@LoathedStranger

Last season was a big disappointment after the largely enjoyable 2021-22. A different approach to recruitment didn't go well and the popular '21-22 squad were let go – only two of those players remain, little more than a year on – while the Robins also lost their head coaches, as Scott Lindsey opted for a quick departure and Jody Morris was sacked. And performances were frustrating, too, with numerous points dropped during latter stages of games.
The big talking point is Town's latest rebuild, abandoning last summer's endeavours and starting again – *again* – with new boss Michael Flynn having more of a say in transfers.
The pantomime villain will be Dean Lewington, as this season he will have the audacity to break the appearance record at one club set by Swindon hero John Trollope. [Lewington has played in 765 league games for MK Dons, plus another 29 for Wimbledon FC; Trollope made 770 league outings for Swindon.]
Our key player will be Charlie Austin [below]. A prolific scorer will go a long way in this division, as long as Swindon play to his strengths in the same way that Richie Wellens accommodated Eoin Doyle when the Robins were last promoted out of League Two.
Look out for Abu Kanu, an under-18s attacker who debuted last season. I expect a few elite academies to start showing an interest.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Cameron Norman, who has just joined MK Dons from Newport. He was an absolute rotter when we went to Rodney Parade last season: he got one of our lads sent off, scored a goal and played well. The cheek of it.
Fans think our owner is laying low in Australia. Clem Morfuni is still liked, and he never planned to be in the spotlight all the time, but – after he was front-row-centre in '21-22 – his engagement with fans spiralled in line with Town's season in '22-23.
I won't be happy unless we genuinely compete. All campaign. Please. I beg.
We'll finish 6th. The league is stronger than it was last season, but the lower play-off places certainly aren't beyond the realms of possibility for a clutch of clubs, including Swindon.



FFT VERDICT 10TH

After a youth-centred, director of football-led approach for the first two years of Morfuni's ownership, Flynn's appointment suggests a change of tack. Swindon seek a quick route to League One, but may compromise developmental and stylistic principles in pursuit.



TRANMERE ROVERS



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 12th **FA CUP** First Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Josh Hawkes (11)

FAN FILE

SAM ROBINSON

Last season was just boring. We were never really in the promotion race, nor in danger of going down. It felt from mid-February as though everyone was going through the motions.
The big talking point is the decision to hire Ian Dawes [above] as manager, after three caretaker spells, and Nigel Adkins as technical director. It wouldn't surprise me if Adkins was in the dugout before the New Year.
Our key player will be new signing Kristian Dennis. His 20 goals helped Carlisle to promotion and he could be the striker we've been crying out for, though we do lack the creativity to give him the service that he needs.
The opposition player I'd love here is Elliot Watt, who registered 16 assists from Salford's midfield last season.
The pantomime villain will be league newcomers Wrexham, won't it? Plenty expect them to breeze through League Two, which puts a target on their back. They'll be used to it, though.



Our most underrated player is Ethan Bristow [below], who joined from Reading and became one of the best left-backs in League Two. He's 21 and has one year left on his contract, so we might cash in this summer, but that would leave us with a huge hole to fill.
The one change I'd make would be to sell sponsorship naming rights to the stadium and reduce ticket prices. It's a chicken-and-egg situation – we need income to invest in the squad and meet rising costs, but charging £500 for a season ticket or £25 on the day in League Two is mad, particularly in a cost-of-living crisis.
I won't be happy unless we're pushing for the play-offs.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's the cheap option, which added to the discontent as we appeared to lack a plan once James Vaughan exited as sporting director last September, seven months into the role. In the owner's defence, he wouldn't do anything to put the club's future at risk, which can't be said of some chairmen.
If he left, he should be replaced by Luke Garrard, who has been doing great work at Boreham Wood for years without getting a Football League job.
We'll finish 12th.

FFT VERDICT 16TH

After a disappointing mid-table finish, Rovers need inspiration. New faces Regan Hendry in midfield, plus poachers Dennis and Luke Norris, may provide it with their promotion-winning know-how, but internally-appointed gaffer Dawes will have to prove himself.



WALSALL



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 16th **FA CUP** Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP Second Round **TOP SCORER** Danny Johnson (15)

FAN FILE

ROB JONES
@RobJNumber13

Last season was irritating. The January returns of loanees Danny Johnson and Liam Bennett turned play-off possibles into relegation candidates. Michael Flynn failed to find a playing style that allowed us to control games and paid the price. Another year, another boss.
This season will be different because we're in for another rebuild in a highly competitive League Two.
I won't be happy unless we see a clear style of play on the pitch, regardless of how attractive it is to watch.
Our key player will be the captain, Donervon Daniels [above, right] – one of the best centre-backs in the division.
Look out for Isaac Hutchinson [below] – more than capable of double figures for goals and assists from midfield if we play to his strengths.
Fans think our owner is under a bit of pressure. Trivela have built up credit with fans for investments made off the pitch since last summer's takeover, but player recruitment and their talk of a new 'seven-point football strategy' really needs to deliver. Signing Johnson, who was superb for us during the first half of last term before Mansfield took him back to warm their bench, is a step in the right direction.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Bradford's Andy Cook. A real wind-up merchant who was relegated from League One with us in 2018-19.
The active player I'd love to have back is Tom Bradshaw – a proven goalscorer and decent guy.
The pantomime villain will be Ben Foster. He's a likeable bloke, but his GoPro will take some stick this season.
The thing my club really gets right is transparency and communication – it's generally good, from fans forums to meet-the-manager evenings.
I'm least looking forward to playing Salford. The media interest remains tedious, their following is poor and we never beat them.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that we're all desperate for Mat Sadler to do well in his first job, having had two spells with us as a player. He's said all the right things but probably won't be cut much slack if we get off to a slow start after so many years' stagnation.
We'll finish 14th.



FFT VERDICT 18TH

Walsall fans wanted an exciting appointment after slumping to 16th with two wins in 23, so the internal appointment of Mat Sadler was surprising. It's hard to be too positive: Ryan Stirk looks a steady pickup from Birmingham, at least, to accompany Johnson's return.



AFC WIMBLEDON



LAST SEASON

LEAGUE TWO 21st **FA CUP** Second Round
LEAGUE CUP First Round **TOP SCORER** Ethan Chislett (11)

FAN FILE
GARY JORDAN
@Gazjor1

Last season was a disappointment, and I hope serious lessons have been learnt from it. After a steady start, we fell apart at the turn of the year – we can't afford to do that again this term.
This season will be different because the work done behind the scenes will dramatically help issues on the pitch, or so we hope. It certainly looks pretty promising so far. Ryan McLean looked like a talent at non-league Hereford.
The big talking point is how our player recruitment and retention goes this summer and, maybe more importantly, in January – that's when our squad depth has been really tested over the last couple of seasons.
Look out for Morgan Williams... again. I mentioned the midfielder last year, but this could be the season he breaks into the first team. He's just signed full professional terms and is highly rated as a Wales youth international.
The pantomime villain will be the whole setup of *that* club, naturally.



Our key player will be Harry Pell [below]. We missed his presence and his... 'antics' when he was out injured last season. He can chip in with a vital goal or two as well.
Our most underrated player is Hus Biler. After making the right full-back role his own, the 21-year-old should reach new heights this term.
The thing my club really gets right is the street food and drink offerings at Plough Lane on matchday, which add to the atmosphere and experience.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's on borrowed time, which is a little unfair, as most are understanding of the dud hand that Johnnie Jackson has been dealt with regards to budget and last season's horrendous injury list. The signs are good: we just need to make a solid start to the campaign for him to regain some of the trust that has been lost by the doubters.
If he left, he should be replaced by anybody with a proven track record at this level of the pyramid.
I won't be happy unless we finish mid-table, minimum – or, at the very least, nowhere near the drop zone!
We'll finish somewhere between 10th and 16th. We're crossing our fingers for some much-needed stability.

FFT VERDICT 17TH

Returning to their spiritual home was a £32m dream the club is now handling practical realities of. It's been tough, yet last term's squad was capable of higher than 21st. Early business has been promising, especially Crawley's James Tilley, but is Johnnie Jackson the one?



WREXHAM



LAST SEASON

NATIONAL LEAGUE Winners **FA CUP** Fourth Round
FA TROPHY Fourth Round **TOP SCORER** Paul Mullin (46)

FAN FILE
RICH FAY
@RobRyanRed

Last season was everything we ever dreamed of, and more.
The big talking point is whether we're actually good enough to seal back-to-back promotions – even titles.
This season will be different because there's a lot of expectation for us to do well again, but also a lot more teams who are closer to our level.
Our key player will be Paul Mullin [below]. Most fans feel he should be in the Wales squad already and that he could score goals in the Championship.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Callum McFadzean. He gives away so many infuriating fouls.
Our most underrated player is James Jones, a key player for Phil Parkinson. He brings so much to the midfield and pops up with important moments.
Look out for Ryan Barnett, who joined from Solihull Moors in February. He's a proper winger: electric pace, brilliant dribbling, and he loves to run at full-backs and attack the bylines.



The thing my club really gets right is building the brand and getting global exposure – even after the takeover got approved, no one could have predicted quite how well-known Wrexham would become across the world.
The one change I'd make would be to sort out regular problems with ticket sales and merchandise supply issues. It's a healthy problem to have, but the demand far exceeds the supply.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that he's a great man who's right for the job and deserves credit. The football isn't always pretty, but it is effective. After a couple of transfer windows, his class was clear to see.
If he left, he should be replaced by Darren Ferguson – a club favourite and proven in the Football League.
The active player I'd love to have back is Joe Allen, still adored by fans after two matches on loan [in 2008].
I won't be happy unless we reach the play-offs, at least. There has been so much talk about how we have League One and even Championship-quality players – now is the time to prove it.
We'll finish 2nd. We've an experienced manager, a fantastic team that's used to winning, and financial muscle if it's needed. Teams won't fancy playing us.

FFT VERDICT 2ND

After decades of dismay, Wrexham fans now have a team to believe in, thanks to their loved Hollywood owners. It might not be 111 points this time, but with razor-sharp finisher Mullin and defender Ben Tozer around, the Red Dragons may go straight through League Two.

SEASON PREVIEW 2023-24

NATIONAL LEAGUE / 2023-24

With two big spenders out of the way from last season, promotion is up for grabs, not just for Barnet and Chesterfield but a host of hungry, ambitious underdogs

Words Mark Carruthers



ALDERSHOT TOWN

The Shots had lost five of their last eight and were peering nervously over their shoulder when Tommy Widdrington arrived from King's Lynn in April – then they went unbeaten in the new man's six matches. He'll have to strengthen to avoid another nervy year; his son, Theo, and defender Aaron Jones followed him from The Walks to kickstart the recruitment. 18TH

ALTRINCHAM

The talented Phil Parkinson (not that one) continues to forge a strong reputation for himself at Alty, who arguably deserved better than a 17th-placed finish. Bringing in Fleetwood midfielder Chris Conn-Clarke and Harrogate's exquisitely named Dior Angus does hint at a top-10 push in the upcoming campaign. 9TH

BARNET

Undergoing evolution rather than revolution, Barnet's squad looks more than capable of securing a play-off place again, despite the loss of Ryan De Havilland to regular Bees-botherers, Peterborough. Maidenhead winger Sam Barratt and Brackley talisman Callum Stead are shrewd acquisitions by Dean Brennan. 2ND

BOREHAM WOOD

Departures have hogged the headlines, with Dennon Lewis, Josh Rees, Will Evans and long-serving captain Mark Ricketts all leaving, but enough talent remains for another top-seven push. Luke Garrard is one of the National League's most astute managers. 7TH

BROMLEY

The Ravens are another side that sneaked into last season's play-offs and will have similar expectations again. Losing Omar Sowunmi to League Two Sutton was a blow but Andy Woodman moved quickly to sign Cole Kpekawa and Sam Woods from Maidenhead and Barnet respectively. Midfielder Mitchel Bergkamp, 24-year-old son of Dennis, will look to kick on. 4TH

CHESTERFIELD

The Spireites are highly fancied to bounce back from their play-off final heartache against Notts County. Paul Cook has made eye-catching signings, with Tom Naylor dropping below League One for the first time since 2014-15 and Will Grigg for the first time in his career, but it isn't all thirtysomethings – talented tyro Bailey Hobson has been snaffled from Alfreton. 1ST

DAGENHAM & REDBRIDGE

The Daggers have had something of a clear-out over the summer, with Paul McCallum and Matt Robinson among those departing for pastures new. Boreham Wood midfielder Josh Rees is a decent signing as his new employers seek improvement on 2022-23's upper mid-table finish, while winger Ryan Hill has put pen to paper after three years at Eastleigh. 16TH

DORKING WANDERERS

Dorking's remarkable rise up the non-league pyramid looked under threat in March, yet they not only survived but finished 16th, albeit with the league's second-worst defence. Tony Craig, 38, has signed on until 2025 following his loan spell, and highly rated young keeper Harrison Male is a good addition from Worthing after he broke into the England C setup, but they'll need to impress to secure another season of safety – Dorking conceded 91 goals last term. 21ST

EASTLEIGH

Lee Bradbury has turned to the Football league in his bid to fly the Spitfires up into the play-off places, after missing out by just four points last season. Stevenage midfielder Jake Taylor, Sutton winger Enzio Boldewijn and Colchester defender Ryan Clamping have all joined, and so has an experienced National League goalscorer in the returning Paul McCallum. 5TH

EBBSFLEET UNITED

Back in non-league's top tier, the Fleet want to wow fans at a higher level after being lauded for their promotion from the National League South, finishing 20 points clear of second-placed Dartford, scoring 110 goals. Ouss Cisse from Eastleigh and Walsall's Hayden White have come in, but most important for Dennis Kutrieb is to keep hold of the 38-goal Dominic Poleon – that would certainly aid their chances. 20TH





AFC FYLDE

The Coasters, who were relegated from the National League alongside Ebbsfleet in 2020, also return as champions, but champions of the North – and though they may have failed in their endeavour to reach the Football League by 2022, they remain fiercely ambitious. The additions of King's Lynn forward Gold Omotayo and Chorley wide man Jon Ustabasi look useful, while prolific midfielder Nick Haughton is sticking around having netted 26 league goals in each – *each* – of the last two seasons. A mid-table finish would represent success in their first campaign back at this level. **13TH**

GATESHEAD

The Heed were in stunning form during the second half of the campaign, securing their National League status with considerable ease and reaching the FA Trophy final, where they'd lose 1-0 to Halifax. Losing key midfielder Owen Bailey to Doncaster is a blow, but the signings of England C star Regan Booty and former Liverpool defender Jordan Hunter are clever pieces of business, while Ed Francis, a Manchester City academy product, has made his loan move from Notts County permanent. Loftier targets than a relegation battle should be set for Mike Williamson's men. **8TH**

FC HALIFAX TOWN

The story of the Shaymen's 2022-23 season was their second FA Trophy final win in eight years (left), and the challenge is now to build on the momentum of their Wembley triumph after they finished a disappointing distance of 10 points off the play-offs last term. While they have lost midfielder Harvey Gilmour and captain Jack Senior to Rochdale and Doncaster respectively, Chris Millington's side want to push on towards the top seven and have recruited Hereford midfielder Kane Thompson-Sommers and Sheffield Wednesday left-back Ryan Galvin, while replacing one Senior with another: Bolton defender Adam, who was at The Shay on loan last term. **10TH**

HARTLEPOOL UNITED

Off-field issues could well take centre stage at Pools as owner Raj Singh tries to sell the club, after their Football League return lasted only two seasons. They put up a fight after hiring John Askey, and he is still there, but bouncing back again will be difficult with a squad full of underwhelming additions from his predecessors. New blood has arrived in the form of Bolton goalkeeper Joel Dixon, Scarborough defender Kieran Burton and Newport midfielder Matty Dolan, but more will be needed. **14TH**

KIDDERMINSTER HARRIERS

One of the National League's famous names is back, after a remarkable run of nine straight wins – among them, a 4-1 victory away at runners-up King's Lynn – sealed promotion via the play-offs, having finished closer in points to second-bottom than to second. Russell Penn moved early to bag Gloucester's Kieran Phillips and Darlington's Jack Lambert in his quest to preserve Kiddy's top-tier status after seven seasons away, and the versatile Christian Oxlade-Chamberlain – brother of Alex – and Irish forward Gerry McDonagh have also bolstered the ranks at Aggborough. **22ND**

MAIDENHEAD UNITED

After only escaping relegation on the final day of the season, wily boss Alan Devonshire has strengthened at the back with goalkeeper Craig Ross and defensive duo Lewis Kinsella and Kevin Lokko coming in at York Road. Swindon striker Harry Parsons, who had loan spells at Banbury, Chippenham and Farnborough last term, will bid to bag goals for a team who were the third-lowest scorers in the National League last term, but whether that is enough remains to be seen. **23RD**

OLDHAM ATHLETIC

After an eye-opening first season in non-league, the former Premier League club have made some big signings: Gateshead's Dan Ward will offer industry and endeavour in abundance, while England C's Kurt Willoughby just plundered 20 goals for Chester in the level below. Altrincham midfielder Josh Lundstram is another smart acquisition, as is defender Shaun Hobson, who joins David Unsworth's squad after clocking up over 100 appearances for Southend. **15TH**

OXFORD CITY

The Hoops will play in the fifth tier for the first time in their history, having beaten Worthing and St Albans in the National League South play-offs. They're one of the relegation favourites yet Ross Jenkins seems keen to keep faith with the majority of the existing squad, including the former Oxford United Joshes, Parker and Ashby, plus Alfie Potter, who once starred for Havant & Waterlooville at Anfield in the FA Cup. **24TH**

ROCHDALE

Bouncing straight back into the Football League is tough and Dale face a challenge in turning around the negative momentum from a disastrous season, in which they finished eight points adrift at the foot of the table. Halifax midfielder Harvey Gilmour is a clever addition, Harrogate defender Kyle Ferguson (son of Barry) has great potential and Notts County's Kairo Mitchell adds experience of a promotion push, but it would be quite a stretch to suggest his new side will match his previous employers' exploits. **11TH**

SOLIHULL MOORS

A 15th-placed finish was a disappointment for Moors after they reached the play-off final in 2022, so Neal Ardley's exit was a surprise only in that it wasn't confirmed before the end of June. By then, he had already arranged deals for York's Gus Mafuta, Chorley talisman Connor Hall, Fylde defender Kyle Morrison and Halifax attacker Matt Warburton, so successor Andy Whing has plenty to play with as they try to reassert themselves higher up the table. **12TH**

SOUTHEND UNITED

Despite well-publicised off-field issues – in May the club were given more time to clear a £275,000 tax debt – Southend only narrowly missed out on a play-off place last season. Their bid to refresh the squad and go one spot better is yet to get going, while they have lost experienced trio Shaun Hobson, Steve Arnold and Rhys Murphy to Oldham, Sutton and Yeovil respectively. Newbies will have to wait for manager and Blues legend Kevin Maher. **6TH**

WEALDSTONE

The Stones surpassed all expectations in 2022-23 as they ended the campaign in 13th, their highest league finish in 37 years. Matching that would be a real test for Stuart Maynard's charges, but a club and squad that love to prove the doubters wrong will relish the challenge. Some 16 members of last season's squad have been retained, with consistency the key to success at Grosvenor Vale. **17TH**

WOKING

One of the stories of last term, having finished as the best of the rest behind Wrexham, Notts County and Chesterfield, Woking then fell at home to seventh-placed Bromley in the play-offs. Darren Sarll has gone for experience, including Newport's Robbie Willmott, Wealdstone's Sam Habergham and Dagenham's Matt Robinson, as they look to cement themselves as promotion contenders, while Bromley's Dennon Lewis has made the shortish move around the M25. **3RD**

YORK CITY

The Minstermen only narrowly avoided an instant relegation on their National League return. Sheffield Wednesday goalkeeper David Stockdale – doubling as head of recruitment – and Blyth striker Cedric Main arrived before new co-owner Matt Uggla's takeover went through in late-June. Uggla "took stewardship" of relegated Yeovil only for that to fall through and he soon went back to the Glovers to sign Zanda Siziba for a second time. York need Lenell John-Lewis to fire again to avoid another underwhelming season. **19TH**

SEASON PREVIEW 2023-24

WSL

WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE / 2023-24

Chelsea were pushed all the way last term, before triumphing again. Can they make it five in a row?



ARSENAL

The Gunners finished only third last season, but with Beth Mead and Vivianne Miedema set to return from injury and some key acquisitions, there are reasons to be optimistic. Swedish defender Amanda Ilestedt has arrived from PSG, while out-of-contract Alessia Russo's exit from Manchester United prompted reports she'd head to the Emirates after the Gunners had two world-record bids rejected in January. Jonas Eidevall dragged Arsenal through last season's injury crisis impressively, a first Champions League semi-final since 2013 a sign they'll be back stronger.

KEY PLAYER Frida Maanum *FFT* VERDICT 2nd

ASTON VILLA

Ninth in 2021-22, Villa had a superb rise last season to finish fifth. Head coach Carla Ward was smart in her recruitment, bringing in key signings such as 22-goal Golden Boot winner Rachel Daly and the influential Kenza Dali, plus Jordan Nobbs and Lucy Staniforth in January. They've already snapped up Dutch number one Daphne van Domselaar, to replace Hannah Hampton, and there's no reason they can't be 'best of the rest' again with more smart signings. Villa only seem to be going in one direction.

KEY PLAYER Rachel Daly *FFT* VERDICT 5th

BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION

The Seagulls need stability. Last term's 11th-placed finish was too close for comfort for a side who had three permanent head coaches in a disrupted season. They do have quality, though, and a nice blend of youth and experience – summer signing Pauline Bremer, recruited from Champions League finalists Wolfsburg, is a proven goalscorer who has also played for Lyon and Manchester City. Head coach Melissa Phillips made a strong early impression, and will hope to keep hold of England's Katie Robinson.

KEY PLAYER Katie Robinson *FFT* VERDICT 8th

BRISTOL CITY

Back in the WSL after two seasons in the second tier, Bristol City bounced back by fighting off London City Lionesses for promotion. It will be tough, there's no doubt about it - last time in the top flight, they lost 9-0 at Chelsea and 8-1 at Manchester City - and boss Lauren Smith will be under no illusions. They've already lost captain Aimee Palmer and will need to recruit well to give themselves a chance of survival.

KEY PLAYER Abi Harrison *FFT* VERDICT 12th

CHELSEA

It may be boring to predict Chelsea as champions for what would be a fifth year running, but the Blues are so hard to stop. Worryingly for their rivals, there's a general feeling that Emma Hayes' side were not at their best last term – Guro Reiten, who topped the WSL assist charts, apart – as they contended with injuries in attack, yet still won the title on the final day, plus a third straight FA Cup. Though Magdalena Eriksson and Pernille Harder have departed, they've been swift to make acquisitions with USA superstar Catarina Macario arriving from Lyon, plus 117-cap Canadian full-back Ashley Lawrence from PSG and left-back Alejandra Bernabe from Atletico Madrid.

KEY PLAYER Guro Reiten *FFT* VERDICT 1st

EVERTON

We said last season that Everton needed a solid, mid-table no frills campaign and that's what they got under new head coach Brian Sorensen, finishing sixth. The Dane oversaw a new-look Toffees side that got off to a good start with a team filled with exciting young players, before dropping away towards the end of the campaign. The club hope his recruitment will continue to drive them forward, necessary after the retirement of ex-Lioness Izzy Christiansen.

KEY PLAYER Gabby George *FFT* VERDICT 6th

LEICESTER CITY

Willie Kirk was one of the stories of 2022-23, rescuing Leicester from certain relegation after replacing Lydia Bedford in November. The Foxes were winless and rock bottom of the league, but a 3-0 win over Brighton in January kicked things off and eventually led to their survival. Some smart signings such as Bayern Munich loanee goalkeeper Janina Leitzig played a huge part – if Kirk can hold on to key players such as Sophie Howard and be as shrewd with his recruitment as he was in January, they'll be fine.

KEY PLAYER Aileen Whelan *FFT* VERDICT 10th

LIVERPOOL

The Reds were unspectacular on their WSL return last season, finishing seventh, but at least steered clear of the four-way relegation battle at the bottom. Experienced head coach Matt Beard picked up some big results, including an opening day win over Chelsea, and January signings such as Japan international Fuka Nagano were pivotal. With Beard's focus on younger talent, Rhiannon Roberts was among those released this summer as Liverpool look to push towards the top half, as befits a club of their size.

KEY PLAYER Fuka Nagano *FFT* VERDICT 7th

MANCHESTER CITY

City are a hard team to place. After falling out of the top three for the first time since 2014, the decision to keep head coach Gareth Taylor for another year was far from popular. Taylor has said this will be a quiet summer as he looks to build on last term's new-look side, when two early defeats cost them dearly. Avoid that and, with no European distractions, they should fare better. Lionesses Chloe Kelly, Lauren Hemp and Alex Greenwood, plus striker Khadija Shaw, who scored 31 in all competitions last term, is some spine.

KEY PLAYER Khadija Shaw *FFT* VERDICT 3rd

MANCHESTER UNITED

Runners-up United finally broke into the top three last season, finishing nine points ahead of Arsenal and Manchester City, taking Chelsea to the final day of the season and reaching a first major final. Marc Skinner's made good progress – they did the double over Arsenal – but have now lost key players in Ona Batlle and Alessia Russo. Highly rated defender Evie Rabjohn has arrived from Aston Villa, but at 18, is one for the future. Ella Toone, Hannah Blundell and captain Katie Zelem remain excellent in the present.

KEY PLAYER Leah Galton *FFT* VERDICT 4th

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

Spurs can't afford another year flirting with the drop. Who knows what may have happened had they not spent a British record £250,000 to sign Beth England in January - the striker's 12 goals in as many games proved pivotal. With plenty of internationals in their squad, including Drew Spence, it's time for Spurs to show they're serious. They need a solid campaign.

KEY PLAYER Beth England *FFT* VERDICT 9th

WEST HAM UNITED

Last season became a real struggle for West Ham, despite early signs that it might show promise and head coach Paul Konchesky was relieved of his duties in May. The Hammers have established international quality in attack, led France star Viviane Asseyi, but it's hard to escape a feeling that the team have been drifting, with stalwart midfielder Kate Longhurst released this summer. Another struggle is possible.

KEY PLAYER Dagny Brynjarsdottir *FFT* VERDICT 11th

Words Rich Laverty

SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP / 2023-24

GET INVOLVED
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#FFTPREVIEW

Brendan Rodgers has rekindled his Celtic romance but can Michael Beale, another familiar Old Firm face, break Hoops hearts in his first full Rangers season?



Over the past nine months, it's been a case of 'out with the old, in with the older', after Glasgow's big two turned to what they knew best to lead them to glory.

Celtic fans were understandably dismayed by the loss of the universally popular Ange Postecoglou to Tottenham, the Aussie leaving on the back of winning a domestic treble. Replacing him seemed an unenviable task and a host of left-field names were linked, only for club chiefs to quickly secure the return of another man who knows his way around a treble – Brendan Rodgers.

The Ulsterman has some work to do to win over some of the dedicated diehards who never forgave his in-season departure to Leicester in 2019, but he's a known quantity with a proven track record of success in Scotland. He's spoken of his desire to take Celtic to the next level when it comes to European football, but they may face a stiffer test than they've been used to of late, closer to home.

Michael Beale hasn't wasted any time making his own mark on the Rangers squad he inherited from Giovanni van Bronckhorst. The Light Blues have a lot of ground to make up, but Beale at least knows what it takes to seize bragging rights in Glasgow, following a previous spell as Steven Gerrard's assistant when they last lifted the Premiership title. Celtic are clear favourites, but there have been signs since his November return that Beale can at least prove a thorn in the Hoops' side, assuming he can add some shrewd summer signings.

Aberdeen and Hearts kept faith in their respective interim bosses – Barry Robson and Steven Naismith – and will fancy their chances for 'best of the rest', with Hibernian nipping at their heels if they can improve recruitment under new sporting director Brian McDermott. Livingston, Motherwell and St Mirren will all feel they can push for the remaining top-six spot although, inevitably, they've all had to cope with the loss of key players.

Kilmarnock and Ross County should improve. Killie flirted with the drop, while County came from three goals down in the final 20 minutes in the play-offs against Partick Thistle to salvage their top-flight status.

There's intrigue around St Johnstone as interested parties look to buy the club, while promoted Dundee need to quickly assemble a squad capable of competing at this level. Both may find themselves dragged into a relegation dogfight but, equally, very little separates a clutch of teams who'll ensure another competitive campaign.

AT THE LOWER LEVELS...

Jim Goodwin has some rebuilding job on his hands at Dundee United, after a 2022-23 that lurched between disasters and ended in top-flight relegation. They won't have it all their own way – Ayr, Dunfermline, Partick, Queen's Park and Raith Rovers are all likely to have a big say in a dog-eat-dog league. In League One, Falkirk need this to be the year they return to Scottish football's second tier, though Marvin Bartley's Queen of the South are worth keeping an eye on. Clyde need to bounce back quickly in League Two but Dumbarton will hope to make amends for last term's play-off woes.

Kenny Millar

FourFourTwo 2023-24 PREDICTION

1. **Celtic**
2. Rangers
3. Aberdeen
4. Hearts
5. Hibernian
6. St Mirren
7. Motherwell
8. Kilmarnock
9. Livingston
10. Ross County
11. St Johnstone
12. Dundee

WHO WILL WIN THE LEAGUE?



4/6
CELTIC



11/10
RANGERS



100/1
ABERDEEN



ABERDEEN



LAST SEASON

PREMIERSHIP 3rd **SCOTTISH CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Semi-Final **TOP SCORER (ALL COMPS)** Duk, Bojan Miovski (18)

FAN FILE

GLEN SCHREUDER
@schreuder92

Last season was a rollercoaster: solid first half, before our form nose-dived spectacularly following the World Cup, culminating in the embarrassing Scottish Cup exit to Darvel. However, after replacing Jim Goodwin with Barry Robson, we went on a seven-game winning run to finally finish 3rd. Wild!
The big talking point is which teams we will face in our first European group stage appearance since 2007-08.
This season will be different because expectations are higher after 2022-23, especially after goal-assist machine Leighton Clarkson has been tied down permanently from Liverpool. We sold a record 10,000 season tickets in the first two weeks they were on sale.
Our key player will be Duuuuuuuuuk! He creates something out of nothing, scores goals and terrifies opposition defenders. Fingers crossed he stays put.
Look out for Ryan Duncan [below]. The 19-year-old got good experience under Robson and should kick on.



Our most underrated player is goalkeeper Kelle Roos [above]. The Dutchman came up clutch last year.
The active player I'd love to have back is Graeme Shinnie: captain, leader and passion merchant – which is just as well because he's rejoined from Wigan!
Fans think our owner is exuberant. Dave Cormack loves a Twitter wind-up and hasn't been afraid to back a boss.
The pantomime villain will be Ryan Jack. No other words needed.
The thing my club really gets right is fan engagement, something they've improved massively over the years.
I won't be happy unless we win a trophy. We've only the 2014 Scottish League Cup to show in 27 years.
I'm least looking forward to playing Celtic. It's been that long since we beat them; get those games out of the way.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that we're largely behind him, given the results and league finish last season. Robson has shown admirable tactical awareness and made us hard to beat. It'll be interesting to see how he goes with a full campaign and managing the expectations last term has brought.
We'll finish 3rd again, looking down on Hearts but hopefully closing that gap to the top two as well.

FFT VERDICT 3RD

Barry Robson's successful caretaker stint landed him the full-time job in May, and he'll want to stay true to the principles that sparked the Dons' resurgence. Almost overnight the team became much harder to beat, with firepower in attack to accompany the rekindled resilience.



CELTIC



LAST SEASON **PREMIERSHIP** Winners **SCOTTISH CUP** Winners **LEAGUE CUP** Winners **CHAMPIONS LEAGUE** Group Stage **TOP SCORER** Kyogo Furuhashi (34)

FAN FILE

COLIN WATT
@Colin88Watt

Last season was near-perfection: our fifth treble in seven years, domination in Scotland and another guaranteed entry into the Champions League.
The big talking point is the return of Brendan Rodgers [below]. There are more than a few people upset at how he left – how will he win them back?
This season will be different because a new playing style will hopefully lead to a bit more European success. It's been two decades since we last won a European knockout tie, in reaching the 2003-04 UEFA Cup quarter-finals.
I won't be happy unless we retain the title. We're two shy of Rangers – the day we overtake them will be glorious.
Our key player will be talisman Kyogo Furuhashi, if he doesn't follow Ange Postecoglou to Spurs. The Japanese goal machine reached 50 Celtic goals quicker than Henrik Larsson.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is James McCarthy. I still don't understand why we signed him.



Our most underrated player is centre-back Carl Starfelt, who's formed an unbelievable partnership alongside Cameron Carter-Vickers. They've never lost a domestic game starting together.
Look out for Rocco Vata, a Republic of Ireland youth international who's close to breaking through to the first team.
The active player I'd love to have back is Virgil van Dijk.
The opposition player I'd love here is Duk. The Aberdeen forward looks like he could step up and is close with Jota.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Todd Cantwell, a man who posts his own season highlights after losing the title to his team's biggest rivals. He's overhyped and likely to be injured at various points this term.
The one change I'd make would be bringing the B team and women's team either back to play at Celtic Park or a nearby stadium in Glasgow – not Airdrie, where they're currently based.
I'm least looking forward to playing Aberdeen. Barry Robson's Reds could surprise a few.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that Rodgers must improve his weak record in the transfer market if we're going to progress in Europe.
We'll finish 1st.

FFT VERDICT 1ST

It'll be interesting to see how Celtic transition from one distinctive style of play to another, but, with Brendan Rodgers, they look primed to pick up where they left off under Ange Postecoglou. However, it's high time they turn plaudits into points in the Champions League.



DUNDEE



LAST SEASON

CHAMPIONSHIP Winners **SCOTTISH CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Quarter-Final **TOP SCORER** Lyall Cameron (14)

FAN FILE
JAKE SHAW
@DensParkChoir

Last season was tough, but with an incredible ending. Beating Queen's Park 5-3 away on the final day was the best experience I've had in football. The ebb and flow that afternoon made it all the sweeter when our fifth goal went in to seal it. Pandemonium.
The big talking point is the sacking of manager Gary Bowyer days after winning the title. Tony Docherty, who lives locally, only has past experience as an assistant.
This season will be different because we'll have to scrap for every point – it'll be a huge mentality shift.
Fans think our owner is quite ruthless, from the Bowyer affair to disposing of out-of-contract players by phone. Chairman Tim Keyes talks a big game about the new stadium, but we're yet to see much of an update.
The opposition player I'd love here is Joel Nouble. The Livingston man has magic feet and he can score, so it's no wonder he has loads of suitors.
Our key player will be new arrival Joe Shaughnessy, a proven leader in the top flight. His experience will be vital.
Look out for Lyall Cameron [above]. The 20-year-old midfielder had his breakout year in 2022-23, sweeping all three individual club player awards.
The active player I'd love to have back is Greg Stewart. That man has given me some of the best memories following Dundee. He's had a spell in India – now it's time to come home.
The pantomime villain will be a guy we don't expect. Paul McGowan, Scott Brown, Steven Naismith and Alfredo Morelos have all moved on in recent years, so there's going to be a lack of s**thousery this season.
I'm least looking forward to playing Celtic. We've not beaten them away for over 20 years and I'm sick of it.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is initially positive. Docherty is making all of the right noises and, considering the crazy treatment of Bowyer, things are looking positive.
If he left, he should be replaced by some of the fans on social media – they seem to know exactly what's missing. One guy had Charlie Adam playing at sweeper.
We'll finish 10th. Any better's a bonus.



FFT VERDICT 12TH

After winning promotion, Dundee have a lot of work to do: new boss Tony Docherty started the summer with a pretty threadbare squad at his disposal. His predecessor, Gary Bowyer, was dismissed on the same day he was named Scottish Championship Manager of the Year.



HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN



LAST SEASON **PREMIERSHIP** 4th **SCOTTISH CUP** QF **LEAGUE CUP** 2nd Round **EUROPA LEAGUE** Play-Off **EUROPA CONFERENCE** Group **TOP SCORER** Lawrence Shankland (28)

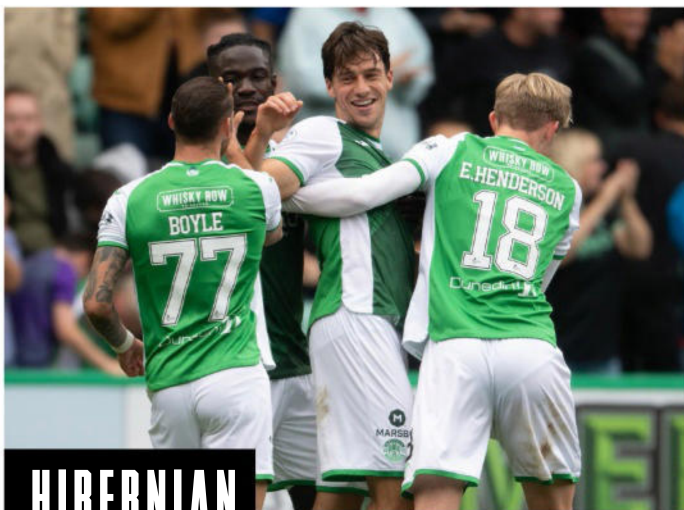
FAN FILE
JAMIE DEVLIN
@JamieDevlin1988

Last season was very disappointing. Yes, we reached a European group stage for the first time since 2004-05, but we never kicked on from 2021-22 and let 3rd slip away far too easily.
The big talking point is Steven Naismith getting the job [as technical director until he receives his UEFA Pro Licence, with Frankie McAvoy as head coach]. The appointment is a bit of a gamble but he brought an exciting new identity in his seven games as interim last season, which was absent under predecessor Robbie Neilson.
I won't be happy unless we finish 3rd. The money that guarantees a club like Hearts – around £5m if you can reach a European group stage – is massive.
Look out for youth to shine now that former B team gaffer Naismith is in charge. Macaulay Tait, Aidan Denholm and Finlay Pollock are all highly rated.
Fans think our owner is a mixed bag. Plenty think that Ann Budge [below] should have sacked Neilson sooner.
Our key player will be Lawrence Shankland [above], the first Hearts player since John Robertson 35 years ago to score 25-plus goals in a season. However, he's about so much more than that. His hold-up and link play is underrated, and he excelled with the armband after injury to Craig Gordon.
Our most underrated player is Liam Boyce. Fans criticised him early last season, but we've missed his industry since an ACL injury.
The opposition player I'd love here is midfielder Dylan Levitt from recently relegated Dundee United. The boy is one hell of a talent.
The pantomime villain will be little Lee Johnson, considering how the final game of last season ended. The Hibs boss' punch at Naismith and his post-match comments mean Edinburgh derbies will be even spicier.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is split. Some, myself included, see it as a positive appointment given how he got us playing as interim, but others think it's the cheap, easy option that shows no ambition from the board.
We'll finish 3rd. Like us last time out, Aberdeen will struggle to juggle both European and domestic football, and we can take full advantage.



FFT VERDICT 4TH

Hearts looked well-positioned to consolidate third spot last season, only for their form to fall off a cliff. Robbie Neilson paid the price and Steven Naismith was promoted to the dugout. A few decent signings should get them back on track to challenge Aberdeen for third place.



HIBERNIAN



LAST SEASON

PREMIERSHIP 5th **SCOTTISH CUP** Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP Group Stage **TOP SCORER** Kevin Nisbet (12)

FAN FILE

ALEX McCALLUM
@Alex_pension

Last season was inconsistent. In the autumn it looked like we'd be bottom six, but a decent run took us to 5th.
The big talking point is the February passing of owner Ron Gordon [below].
I won't be happy unless we get Will Fish back on loan from Manchester United, and sign a creative midfielder.
Our key player will be Elie Youan, a fast, skilful forward who scored some important goals on loan last season. There's a lot of development left in him but he's signed up for three years now, so he'll continue to grow.
Our most underrated player is Joe Newell [above, centre]. He won Player of the Year but still isn't as lauded as he should be by fans. Our good run coincided with his return from injury.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Ewan Henderson. He came from Celtic with plenty of hope, but has been really poor.
Look out for teenager Kanayo Megwa. He could take the open right-back slot.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Lawrence Shankland. He did finish last season as Hearts captain...
The opposition player I'd love here is Celtic's Reo Hatate, a really polished creative midfielder.
The active player I'd love to have back is Super John McGinn, obviously.
Fans think our owners are doing their best – Gordon's sons took over after their father's passing. There's goodwill, as there has clearly been investment on and off the field. We just need to get our recruitment right now.
The one change I'd make would be our poor recruitment, though we hope to see an uptick with Brian McDermott as our new director of football.
I'm least looking forward to playing Rangers. We give them too easy a time of it when we're at home.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is still divided. Lee Johnson steadied his own listing ship and did well in the top six split, but a troubled start may put him under pressure quickly, and he needs a good cup run as well after two early eliminations last season. He talks a lot of nonsense after matches, too. Still, his players work hard and we did make progress across the season.
We'll finish 4th.



FFT VERDICT 5TH

Lee Johnson's position was called into question last season, though a crippling injury list hardly helped him. Progress was made, so Hibs hope to be rewarded for standing by him and signing proven talent in Jordan Obita, keeper Jojo Wollacott and a 36-year-old Adam Le Fondre.



KILMARNOCK



LAST SEASON

PREMIERSHIP 10th **SCOTTISH CUP** Quarter-Final
LEAGUE CUP Semi-Final **TOP SCORER** Daniel Armstrong (12)

FAN FILE

CHRIS HUTCHESON
@hutchylad

Last season was challenging, but survival was the aim. We got there...
This season will be different because the management and recruitment team virtually have a clean slate. It's quite sad to see some of our 2021-22 Championship-winning team depart, but we need to move forward.
The big talking point is our horrific away form: 32 points at home and just eight on the road, including 15 defeats in 19 games. The strange thing is that we can't see an obvious reason why it was so awful last season, particularly following good home performances.
I won't be happy unless we're safe from relegation from an early stage. I'm not expecting the top six; I do, however, expect us to challenge for it.
Fans think our owner is generally good – night and day compared to the previous regime. Things seem much better with Billy Bowie's development to the stadium and surrounding areas, and good relationships with supporters.
The one change I'd make would be to speed up the build of our training facility, allowing the club to return to a grass pitch. The artificial one isn't as bad as opposition fans seem to think, though – I'd miss the rage it induces.
Our key player will be Kyle Vassell [above]. The January arrival's crucial goals won most fans over straight away. He's signed a new two-year contract and I expect him to kick on.
Look out for young David Watson. The 18-year-old midfielder broke into the team in March, and has apparently been spending the summer bulking up.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Kyogo Furuhashi. He appears to charm the officials with a smile but definitely partakes in dark arts.
The active player I'd love to have back is Daniel Bachmann. We've really struggled to fill the keeper position since his 2018-19 loan at Rugby Park.
The pantomime villain will be Lawrence Shankland. We've had back and forth since his Ayr United days.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is mixed. Derek McInnes [below] kept us up and reached a League Cup semi, but survival had to be secured on the last day. There's no obvious style of play.
We'll finish 7th.



FFT VERDICT 8TH

Kilmarnock were condemned more than once last term and told they didn't have a squad built for the top flight. So, it could be that Derek McInnes' greatest achievement was keeping them up, to earn the breathing space over this summer to rebuild the team in his image.



LIVINGSTON



LAST SEASON

PREMIERSHIP 8th **SCOTTISH CUP** Fifth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Bruce Anderson, Joel Nouble (7)

FAN FILE

ALMONDVIEW PODCAST
@Almondviewpod

Last season was like a hot dog at the football: some great moments (the dog and sauce) but also some disappointments (dry bread and price).
I won't be happy unless we stay up. This is the longest we've ever spent in the top flight and I'm delighted. When I look at how far Hamilton have fallen, I'd be really worried about relegation.
Our key player will be Scott Pittman. The midfielder has been with us for eight years and is the heart and soul of Livingston FC. We rely on him to inject the club ethos into new signings.
Look out for Morgan Boyes, a strong centre-back in his second full season here. He's shown flashes of brilliance.
The thing my club really gets right is finding diamonds in the rough from the most obscure places. Players like Pittman, Lyndon Dykes and Joel Nouble [below] have become fantastic for us.
I'm least looking forward to playing Aberdeen, who have just signed our ex-captain, Nicky Devlin.



Our most underrated player is Cristian Montano [above]. Others may get the plaudits but his pace, skill and ability to drive us forward are vital.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is Kurtis Guthrie. He's definitely in the top three of the worst players to have pulled on a Livi shirt.
The active player I'd love to have back is Dykes – phenomenal for us in 2019-20, and he's gone on to do outstanding things for Scotland too.
Fans think our owner is probably the man with the hardest job in football! Livingston's financial issues have been no secret over the years, not helped by COVID-19 and our smaller fanbase. The fans' first priority is that the club is run well and we don't succumb to the dismal financial positions of the past.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is mixed after a really poor finish to last season, which David Martindale did put on himself. But he needs to stay. Davie lives and breathes the club and always gets us out of tough spots with great recruitment, despite limited finances.
If he left, he should be replaced by Queen of the South's Marvin Bartley – a total legend as a player.
We'll finish 9th. After losing a lot of key players, it's going to be a battle.

FFT VERDICT 9TH

You write off Livingston and David Martindale at your peril – it's no slight on them if they take a step backwards this season. By their own admission, they punch above their financial weight. It should catch up with them eventually, but Livi always manage to find a way.



MOTHERWELL



LAST SEASON

PREMIERSHIP 7th **SCOTTISH CUP** Fifth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Quarter-Final **EUROPA CONFERENCE** Second Qualifying Round **TOP SCORER** Kevin van Veen (29)

FAN FILE

GRAHAM BARNSTAPLE
@grahamb2105

Last season was a rollercoaster ride. It began with a Europa Conference League qualifying defeat to Sligo Rovers prior to the domestic campaign even starting, which did for manager No.1, Graham Alexander. Club legend Stevie Hammell (No.2) took over and by January he had us destined for relegation, before he was relieved of his services following a Scottish Cup humbling against Raith Rovers. Stuart Kettlewell (No.3) stepped up from the academy to save our skins with a run of two defeats in 14 games to finish 7th – beyond expectations in February.
The big talking point is if Kettlewell [above] can continue like that despite the sale of 29-goal Kevin van Veen.
I won't be happy unless we at least maintain our run in the top flight. The 2024-25 season would be our 40th consecutive year in Scotland's top tier.
Our key player will be February signing Calum Butcher [below], who brought steel to a defence in need.



Our most underrated player is Paul McGinn. Playing right across the back, he was rarely under 7/10 in any game.
Look out for midfielder Lennon Miller, who became Motherwell's youngest player when he made his debut six days after his 16th birthday last year.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Tony Watt, who controversially left us in December 2021. His social media stuff is cringeworthy.
The active player I'd love to have back is a fit Louis Moult. We tried last season but it didn't work out, and he was frequently injured while on loan from Burton Albion.
The pantomime villain will be James Tavernier, who could step in to fill the Scott Brown and Alfredo Morelos void.
The thing my club really gets right is our social media output – as is the fan involvement picking matchday music.
The one change I'd make would be to improve the communication and engagement from the Well Society.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is very good, given what he did at the end of last season. Kettlewell's strength is his team selection, though some would say that his weakness is being a little slow to change things.
We'll finish 7th.

FFT VERDICT 7TH

Stuart Kettlewell was credited with easing any relegation concerns after taking over at Fir Park, though he'll have his work cut out trying to replace the flying Dutchman, Kevin van Veen. The Steelmen have at least added some firepower in attack by bringing in Jon Obika.



RANGERS



LAST SEASON **PREMIERSHIP** 2nd **SCOTTISH CUP** Semi-Final **LEAGUE CUP** Runners-up **CHAMPIONS LEAGUE** Group Stage **TOP SCORER** Antonio Colak, James Tavernier (18)

FAN FILE

DAVID EDGAR
@ibroxrocks

Last season was very disappointing. Blighted by injuries, it was also the result of standing still after we won the 2020-21 title. Michael Beale's November arrival and the new signings made an improvement, but the need for big changes soon became clear.
The big talking point is the revamp – we'd grown stale. There's a sense of freshness now, with Jack Butland and Dujon Sterling's arrivals, a new focus off the field and the manager getting a pre-season with his squad.
Our key player will be Todd Cantwell [below] – good lord, he's brilliant. He lost his way at Norwich but looks born to play for us and adores being the centre of attention at a massive club. He plays with a swagger our fans love.
Our most underrated player is centre-back Connor Goldson [above]. The defence faltered when he was out.
The active player I'd love to have back is Calvin Bassey, an outstanding defender who left us for Ajax last year.



The opposition player who grinds my gears is any of the younger ones at other teams who have great hair. As an old, bald lad, I'm intensely jealous.
Look out for Alex Lowry. He has the talent – now he needs to show it.
I'm least looking forward to playing St Johnstone. I don't think I've seen an entertaining game between us two.
Fans think our owner is making some positive, essential changes.
The one change I'd make would be better communication with the fans. The club are making improvements in that regard, but there's still a way to go.
The pantomime villain will be the half-witted SPFL chief executive Neil Doncaster, a man who has brought as much to Scottish football as a small bowl of vegetable soup.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is that the majority rate him, although losing key games to Celtic last season didn't help. He knows what's needed, is very good tactically, though he's not great at keeping his cards close to his chest!
If he left, he should be replaced by Marcelo Bielsa. Oh, it would never happen, and it would end in tears if it did, but what a ride that would be.
We'll finish 1st. What's the point if you can't be optimistic in the summer?

FFT VERDICT 2ND

It's been a summer of change, as several long-serving players left Ibrox to allow for a squad refresh that's probably overdue. January signings Nicolas Raskin and Todd Cantwell made their mark; 6ft 3in striker Sam Lammers, arriving from Serie A, will hope to do the same.



ROSS COUNTY



LAST SEASON
PREMIERSHIP 11th **SCOTTISH CUP** Fourth Round **LEAGUE CUP** Second Round **TOP SCORER** Jordan White (11)

FAN FILE

ALAN ROSS
@Jailender

Last season was a lucky escape. Poor for large chunks with sporadic flashes of brilliance, we were bottom by four points when the league split, but recovered to make the play-off final. We were promptly three goals down after 43 minutes of the second leg to Partick Thistle, before fighting back late on to somehow win on penalties.
I won't be happy unless we recruit some decent wingers. Our direct style needs some excitement adding to it.
Our most underrated player is George Harmon [above]. He was the support act at left-back at the start of last season, but got his chance due to injuries and became a mainstay. Not known for his goals, his equaliser took us to extra time in the play-off final and he scored in the shootout. Hero.
Look out for Dylan Smith, a strong, pacy 17-year-old centre-back who made a handful of appearances at the end of last term. He has interest from some big clubs and a bright future.



The opposition player I'd love here is Callum McGregor – out of our budget, yes, but he's the league's best player.
The active player I'd love to have back is Jackson Irvine. The greatest box-to-box midfielder I've watched at County is now captain at St Pauli in Germany and a mainstay for Australia.
The player I'd happily drive to another club is William Akio. Arriving last summer in a blaze of glory, he seemed to prefer his social media videos to playing. After an off-field incident he was loaned to Raith Rovers and had little impact there, either.
The pantomime villain will be Jordan White: he divides opinion as either a hard worker who fights for every ball or a striker who doesn't score enough.
The thing my club really gets right is hospitality. It's rare an away fan says anything bad about a trip to Dingwall.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is split. Failing to backup 2021-22's sixth-place finish has meant that many are calling for Malky Mackay's head, which will only intensify if we start this season poorly. I'd keep him, just because I'm not sure we could get a manager with his experience for a similar budget.
We'll finish upper end of the bottom half, ideally with no relegation stress.

FFT VERDICT 10TH

Ross County came so close to being in the lower-league section of this preview, only to stun Partick Thistle in the second leg of their play-off final (before taking midfielder Kyle Turner off their hands). Creative midfielder Yan Dhanda gives the Staggies someone to build around.



ST JOHNSTONE



LAST SEASON

PREMIERSHIP 9th **SCOTTISH CUP** Fourth Round
LEAGUE CUP Group Stage **TOP SCORER** Stevie May (10)

FAN FILE

DANNY WILLIAMS
@dannyw1989

Last season was pretty tumultuous. A new-manager bounce at season's end secured safety, but six months without a home win can't be dressed up as anything other than dreadful. Playing a back five in a 0-0 draw with fourth-tier Annan in the first League Cup game set the tone until Steven MacLean [below] took over in April.
This season will be different because Callum Davidson is no longer in charge. Sacking our '20-21 cup double-winning gaffer was brutal, but not unfair. The football was eye-bleeding and players looked utterly bewildered by his tactics.
The big talking point is the release of midfielder David Wotherspoon. The club unceremoniously disposed of its most successful player after 10 years of service, and, whatever the football merits of the decision, the way it was handled left a bad taste in the mouth.
The active player I'd love to have back is left-back Adam Montgomery, who was outstanding last season on loan from Celtic. Having a lad running really fast up the wing is loads of fun.
Our key player will be Cammy MacPherson, now he's the senior man in midfield. He has the ability – time to put it into practice, week in, week out.
Look out for Ross Sinclair [above]. The Scotland Under-21 international should be handed the No.1 shirt, with plenty of expectation on his shoulders.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Celtic's James Forrest and his brother Alan of Hearts, who seem like decent lads but turn into prime Zidane and Figo at the sight of a blue shirt.
I'm least looking forward to playing Livingston. I can't remember a good game between the two teams, a trend unlikely to be bucked any time soon.
The one change I'd make would be pie stand queues that are shorter than for Space Mountain and pints of lager that aren't flat in the stadium bar.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is better than his predecessor. MacLean turned our season around; even those initially worried about his inexperience and role as Davidson's assistant agree he's earned a shot. Scoring as the club clinched its first ever trophy in 2014 [the Scottish Cup] certainly helps, too.
We'll finish a boring 8th, I hope.



FFT VERDICT 11TH

Even neutrals winced when Saints dispensed with Callum Davidson, who will be remembered as a club legend for taking them to Scottish Cup and League Cup glory in one unforgettable season. But things had stagnated badly and Steven MacLean has a big job on his hands.



ST MIRREN



LAST SEASON

PREMIERSHIP 6th **SCOTTISH CUP** Fifth Round
LEAGUE CUP Group Stage **TOP SCORER** Mark O'Hara (12)

FAN FILE

ANDREW CHRISTIE
@thatAndrewC

Last season was historic. Not many predicted a first top-half finish since 1984-85, but Stephen Robinson [above] had us punching above our weight. Some 19 of our 46 points came against fellow top-six sides and we were the only team to take points from Celtic home and away. Yet, Partick Thistle in 2017-18 and Ross County last term show what happens when teams rest on their laurels and stand still.
This season will be different because we're an attractive prospect. Recently we have had more internationals than ever before – see Australia midfielder Keanu Baccus marking Lionel Messi in the knockout stages of the World Cup – and we can be a useful shop window for ambitious young players.
The thing my club really gets right is the kebab pies. They really do have to be tasted to be believed.
Our key player will be Jonah Ayunga [below], once he's recovered from his ACL injury. The ex-Morecambe striker's intelligence and physicality is integral to the way we play.
Our most underrated player is Trevor Carson. Excellent goalkeepers often go under the radar, but the amount of points Carson was worth to St Mirren last season cannot be understated.
Fans think our owner is complicated? We're fan-owned, so try to imagine an exasperated family screaming at each other on a long car journey.
The opposition player who grinds my gears is Hearts' Cammy Devlin, who turns me into The Most Rattled Man™. I take to Twitter, and I post in group chats, and it's all very unedifying.
I'm least looking forward to playing St Johnstone, as usual. Our record in Perth is terrible, and the football on display from both teams even worse. Awful place to go. Awful club.
The fans' opinion of the gaffer is improving. He replaced a club legend in Jim Goodwin but he's proven himself and then some, creating an Us vs Them attitude that's perfect for us.
I won't be happy unless we have a proper crack at the League Cup, not bomb out to lower-league teams in the group. It's our most realistic chance of silverware, as we saw in 2013.
We'll finish 5th, plus a Hampden trip?



FFT VERDICT 6TH

Even Stephen Robinson would say it will be hard to replicate his great work with the Buddies thus far, as Curtis Main, Charles Dunne and captain Joe Shaughnessy all chose to leave. But he gets the best out of all-action midfielder Mark O'Hara, who will be a crucial figure again.

YOUR PREDICTIONS

Last year we successfully tipped the likes of Sheffield Wednesday, Ipswich and Northampton to triumph, but suggesting relegation for Brentford and the play-offs for MK Dons proved less precise... Now it's your turn to be Nostradamus – fill these in and tweet us

THINK YOU CAN DO BETTER? PROVE IT!

PREMIER LEAGUE

YOU PREDICT

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TOP SCORER

CHAMPIONSHIP

YOU PREDICT

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TOP SCORER

LEAGUE ONE

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TOP SCORER

LEAGUE TWO

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TOP SCORER

NATIONAL LEAGUE

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TOP SCORER

WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE

YOU PREDICT

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TOP SCORER

SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP

YOU PREDICT

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TOP SCORER

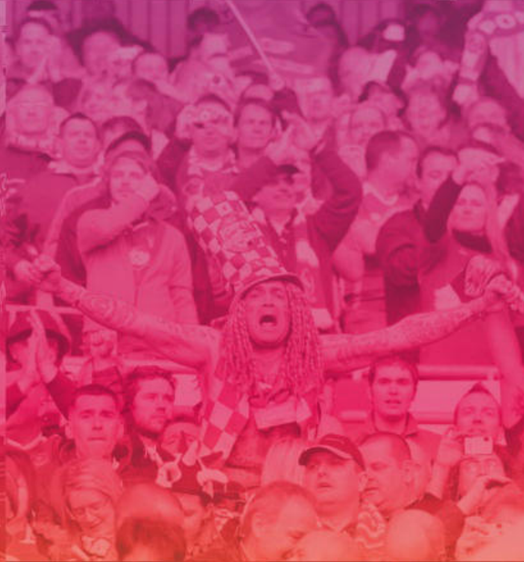


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